

# Stargate Atlantis: The Aftermath

by Jardix

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Summary: After Atlantis left the Pegasus galaxy in the last episode of the series, Colonel Howell and his team are stranded alone in an uncharted corner of Pegasus. The enemies are old, the allies are new, and twists and turns keep the team guessing. Survival is their number one goal; but at what cost? Featuring Lorne, Larrin, and Sheppard's team as well as many other original characters.

## 1. Lost in Space

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**\*\*EDITOR'S NOTE:** To anyone reading this chapter, this is the very first chapter of the first part of my fan-fiction. Some viewers may wish to skip ahead to part 2, where Lorne, Larrin, Sora, and even Sheppard and Teyla have a bigger role. This first part is still a big part of the overall story, and I personally enjoyed the heck out of writing it. It is NOT a mistake that part 2 is fixing, rather a prequel to the actual story. Again, anyone who prefers to skip ahead is welcome to do so; chapter 23 AKA Lost in Space (Again) is where it starts off. I hope you all enjoy this.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Stargate. The word was far too short to convey the meaning it brought to humanity. A simple seemingly stone ring that stood alone on a wooded planet, a portal to other worlds, and even galaxies.<p>

The Stargate, or Stargates, as was the case, was ancient beyond

almost anything else in the universe. There were few artifacts or hidden alcoves in the Pegasus or Milky Way galaxy that could boast an age beyond the unassuming rings. They had been built by a race even more ancient, so ancient that the humans of Earth called them just that: The Ancients. Others called them the Ancestors, because they were quite literally the parent race of all humans in every known galaxy. Thousands of years ago, they had built these gateways to worlds and created a network that spanned two galaxies and tens of thousands of stars. Who knew their original purpose. Travel was the obvious answer; you could go anywhere in the galaxy in as much time as it took to dial up another gate. But some people wondered if there was another reason. Did carefree traders and merchants build them to peddle their wares across foreign markets? Or did ruthless soldiers design them as highways to battlegrounds?

John Howell certainly knew they'd been used for both. Innocent farmers and ranchers had used these Stargates to carve out a living in a very hard and unforgiving galaxy. And he himself had led troops through it just recently.

Most knew him only as Colonel Howell; very few knew he shared a first name with the Colonel John Sheppard of the Atlantis Expedition. He preferred it that way; Colonel Howell had little to no sense of humor and did not look forward to some of his other soldiers making the connection.

Fortunately they had other worries at the moment. Five Marines were sitting alone on a strange planet, staring at their resident scientist fiddled and fiddled with the DHD, or Dial Home Device, that controlled the Stargate.

"That's not helping." Percy Peabody growled again, his distinct British accent coming out.

"What?" A large Texan man in his late twenties asked innocently, rolling around a massive wad of chewing gum in his mouth. Major Jones was a fun-loving Texan who could and would make fun of anyone. The only thing he loved more than messing with Peabody was hitting on girls. He wasn't particular either; if she had a pulse, she was his type.

"Softly humming the Jeopardy theme song!" The Brit snapped, dropping one of his small instruments. His red hair was sticking out at crazy angles and his peeling skin looked redder than normal.

"Sorry. Just trying to help!" Jones said with a sigh. He glanced sideways up at Colonel Howell, who slowly shook his head. Jones hung his head and went to watch the card game in progress on a fallen log on the other end of the clearing.

The six of them were all tired, and Peabody was particularly bad at hiding it. He knew ancient technology like nobody's business, and Major Jones liked to joke that was the only reason they kept him around. Howell had smacked him, hard, because they'd all realized how true it was.

Colonel Howell, Major Jones, Bacon, Bane, and Captain Krag all made up the small Marine contingent now stranded on the strange world. Percy Peabody, the unfortunately named British scientist assigned to their unit, was constantly complaining that he'd wanted to a

botanist. Luckily for the Marines, he also knew Ancient technology better than the famous Doctor Rodney McKay. No one felt like pointing it out, as the overweight Canadian had been known to go into fits of rage over sandwiches and changes to the desktop background on his favorite laptop.

"They're getting restless." Major Bane said quietly, walking up behind Howell. He'd been on a self appointed patrol, but Howell was positive they were the most dangerous thing around.

"I know. Nothing we can do about it though." Howell stated dryly, resting his assault rifle's barrel on his knee. He was sitting on a rocky outcropping overlooking the small clearing that held the Stargate.

"Is Peabody any closer to getting us out of here?"

"Not that I can tell." Howell sighed.

"I can hear you!" Peabody shouted up at the two, growling out a cuss word afterwards.

"Then stop eavesdropping!" Major Bane snapped back at him, narrowing his dark eyes at the Brit. Major Bane was a very formidable figure; he stood at six foot three inches with a very dark complexion and sharp features that reminded Howell of a hawk. The look went well with the man's personality; if Howell didn't have a sense of humor, Bane didn't know what humor was. He was a fantastic fighter with hundreds of kills under his belt, but not much of a conversationalist.

"I may not be a scientist, or whatever Peabody isâ€¦" Bane said with a raised eyebrow. Howell smiled as Peabody turned a shade redder as he overheard them. "â€¦but how hard could this be?"

"From what I understand, very." Howell explained, nodding at the bundles of wires and crystals piled around the device. "Not all the parts are here, and what parts are present aren't all working. Don't mention to the rest of the boys, yet, but I think we'll be here a while."

"I don't think there are any dangerous predators here. No Wraith followed us through the gate. We are alone, for the time being." Major Bane said matter-of-factly, leaning on the butt of his rifle. Howell nodded, having come to the same conclusion two hours ago. But having Bane say it confirmed it; the man was thorough.

"Try and keep moral up. Peabody will figure it out eventually."

"Hopefully." Major Bane said in a resigned tone. He saluted crisply, which Howell returned. He sighed inwardly as he watched the men get to work on a small tent someone had managed to hold on to, wondering if Peabody would get them off the planet at all.

It had all started two days prior. Colonel Howell's team set out to explore other planets in Pegasus, since both Colonel Sheppard and Major Lorne had other things on their minds besides exploration. They were still looking for ancient outposts, advanced allies, or even good farming land. They'd made good progress; four new planets had

been catalogued, and one had a surviving human population. The other three had been leveled first by starving Wraith, and then Replicator ships eradicating the Wraith's food source. The survivors had all fled to the fourth world, who promptly told the Marines not to return after learning of the Atlantean's involvement in both conflicts. Try as he might, Colonel couldn't convince the terrified people that even though Doctor McKay had set the Replicators loose, and then Major Sheppard had awoken the Wraith, they meant no harm to the people of the Pegasus galaxy. They'd left in peace, but barely.

After that, Howell had been relieved when the Ancient database listed his assigned world as uninhabited. The MALP they sent through showed a functioning DHD and a slightly frozen tundra environment. Colonel Howell had taken his team through, even though there were other things occupying the 'big shots upstairs' as Major Jones had put it. Colonel Sheppard had crashed half a Wraith hive ship into the ocean, Doctor Keller had been body-switched with a convicted killer, there were rumors of another group of Asgardians in Pegasusâ€¦

Howell had heard most of it and read all the mission reports, but none of it had come down to him. He was the leader of the 'B' team; when the city was under attack by Michael and his hybrids, Howell was trapped outside the force-field trying to keep the peace and figure out how to get into the force-field. Colonel Sheppard had told him to stay back and come in after them if Sheppard didn't have the situation handled in four hours. Howell never got the chance to do much besides help haul away dead hybrids.

But the Colonel had never complained about his role. Ever since he'd gotten out of boot camp, he'd earned the nickname 'The Finisher'. He never started fights with other soldiers, he finished them. He never engaged enemy forces, he slaughtered those stupid enough to stand against him. He didn't take prisoners, he interrogated them. He was not the shining hero of the story that got the girl, saved the galaxy, and flew off in a stolen alien space ship, he was the guy that decided what to do with said alien space ship after it had been dumped into the ocean. But he didn't complain. John Howell liked his role; it suited him well. He had been perfectly content to run standard exploration missions on strange worlds and occasionally catalogue new species of plants with Peabody.

But in some strange twist of fate, two days ago, Colonel Howell's team had gated into the frozen tundra. They'd left the surly Major Bacon and the dead-shot Captain Krag back at the Stargate to cover their rear while Colonel Howell, Majors Bane and Jones and Peabody all went to investigate a small valley below the plateau the gate had been placed on. Howell had thought it odd; normally the gate was in a central location like a valley or a clearing, but on that world, a chunk had been carved out of a mountain and gate placed there instead. There was barely enough room for Howell's team to spread out after the wormhole died; the DHD was ready to tumble down the steep slope at the first stiff breeze that came by. Major Bacon had complained about being left behind, again, while Captain Krag nervously scanned the horizon. Major Jones had made another remark about making some eggs to go along with the Major's last name, while Bane told him off for acting foolish. Howell had led them all down the mountain, picking his way carefully to avoid falling down the near vertical slope.

All had seemed normal at first. The air was so chilled that they

could see their breaths and there wasn't a cloud in the pale green sky. Percy had gone on and on about possible reasons for the deviant color while Major Jones chewed his gum and pretended to listen. He was a smart aleck kid, but he was their smart aleck kid, and everybody but Peabody liked him. The rocky mountain side threatened to give way at every step; there was little soil and the rocks slid out from Howell's boot at every step. It was unnerving enough to make him wish he'd requested the use of a Jumper, but not so much that he wanted to go back. Far below, the valley floor seemed harmless enough. Grass and scrubby bushes covered the barren landscape thickly, and there wasn't a tree or anything taller than three feet in sight. A large dog would have been invisible, anything larger would have stuck out like a sore thumb. Or so Howell thought.

As his team cleared finally hit the valley floor and stopped to give their legs a quick rest, the radio buzzed to life, startling Howell a little. The silence was so eerie that even their soft breathing seemed out of place.

"Sir? This is Krag, I don't know what it is, but there's somethingâ€¦" He paused long enough to annoy Howell.

"What is it?"

"There's something out there! They're all around you! Get down get down!" A single shot rang out from high above them, and everything moved at once.

Howell and all of his team hit the deck with Peabody being dragged down by Jones, the shot from Krag produced a terrifyingly familiar groan, and twenty Wraith stood up out of the shrubs. It was chaos. Krag kept firing in a steady, pulsating way, with every round taking out another enemy. Major Bane leapt up firing and down another few, while Jones dragged Peabody back towards the hill.

Colonel Howell rolled to his feet, and came face to face with a Wraith commander! They wore no masks or armor, unlike the drones being slaughtered around them, but were even more deadly hand to hand.

Howell's rifle was ripped out of his hands, but Howell was already reaching for his knife. He whipped it out as he ducked a sweeping blow from the clawed hand, and sliced into the Wraith's ribcage, sending a shower of blood into his face.

Screams filled the air, the staccato of gunfire was all around him, and the Wraith was now growling out death threats.

"Insolent humanâ€¦" He ground out in the usual deep tone. He never got a chance to finish the sentence; Howell kicked his knee in, drove his open palm into the Wraith's face, and finished with a deep cut into his throat. Blood streamed out of the gash, the alien's eyes flashed with fury, and the Wraith went down.

After that it was a running fight. Peabody was screaming bloody murder, Jones and Bane were firing sporadically behind them, and Wraith stunner blasts peppered the mountain side. Howell had managed to grab his rifle, but the clip was jammed when it hit a rock. If he'd thought the trip down the mountain was rough, the trip up it was torture. Every step brought a small avalanche of loose rock down, and

it felt like wading in quicksand. Peabody was hit in the back of the head, and fell almost on top of Jones.

"Dang it, Peepeeâ€|" He shouted, using the Brit's favorite nickname.

"Keep moving!" Howell shouted, grabbing Jones vest and dragging him farther up the mountain as he in turn dragged Peabody. Bane was taken a heroic stance on one knee, sliding downward a little bit, firing continually. More white-hot bolts of Wraith stunner fire hit the rocks around them, and Howell was about to make the decision to turn and around fight it out when he heard Bacon shout,

"Grenade!" The furious old southerner was sliding down the mountain on his butt, throwing grenades and holding down the trigger of his P-90, all while shouting profanities and warnings of doom.

"Come on you lily-bellied sons ofâ€| I'll carve you all a nice sweet bowl ofâ€| Your mother was a \_communist!\_" He shouted the last bit with all the malice and righteous fury he could muster, and his clip finally ran out. Howell grabbed the man's vest and stopped the man's freefall, while also dragging Jones, who was dragging Peabody, while Krag was still firing steadily at the top of the mountain.

Finally, the agonizing crawl was over, and they had made it to the plateau. Jones threw Peabody to the ground in front of the gate while Bacon scrambled to dial the gate. Howell covered Bane as he crawled up the slope behind them while Krag switched out his clip. He was sweating profusely, his eyes were bloodshot, and he was so tense Howell practically heard his bones grind together when he moved.

"Fall back to the gate!" Howell shouted, still firing at the Wraith below. He'd seen twenty earlier, but somehow they were swarming up out of what looked like underground tunnels. There were now at least fifty drones climbing towards them, ten commanders snarling up at them from below, and he thought he heard the sound of darts coming into play.

"Hurry it up!" Howell shouted as the gate opened. Jones furiously typed in the IDC while Bane got on the radio.

"This is Major Lucas Bane with Colonel Howell's team, we are encountering heavy resistance! We're coming in hot!" Bane yelled, helping Jones drag Peabody towards the gate. Krag was right behind them, while Bacon and Howell took up the rear.

They were only a yard away. Three agonizingly short feet. Then the dart took an impossible shot from wherever it was flying in the snot-green sky, and twin blasts missed Howell's head by what must have been inches.

One of the blasts, somehow ahead of the other, went through the gate to the unshielded gate room of Atlantis. The other had hit the gate itself as the team charged through.

## 2. Lights in the Forest

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><p>Howell hadn't had time to think or react; he'd just had to keep going. There were darts above them, Wraith drones below them, and both were quickly moving to intercept his team. He didn't have time to think about the dart blast that likely injured people back at Atlantis besides damaging the gate room itself.<p>

More importantly he didn't have time to recall his crash course on wormhole physics, specifically the part about energy blasts and active Stargates. As then Major Carter had found out, a wormhole will 'jump' to another gate if introduced to enough power all at once. SG-1 first found this out when Carter and O'Neill were sent to a lost second gate in the Arctic. They then used this technique to kill a wormhole that had accidentally locked onto a black hole and was slowly sucking the SG-C through it. The last incident Howell could recall of the technique being used was to dial a Super-gate that was spewing out Ori troops and ships to another black hole.

This time it had sent his team to a wooded valley on some unknown planet, theoretically close to Atlantis. The way it worked was the wormhole jumped to the nearest gate; that's how they'd found the second gate on Earth. It was very close to Earth's gate in a cosmic sense, but still took hours to get to from the SG-C in Colorado.

And not two minutes after they'd realized their mistake and caught their breaths; Bane had tried to dial Atlantis again. The DHD was broken. Not just damaged or overgrown with vines as the team had seen before, but broken.

They'd been on the planet for two hours before they were able to wake up Peabody; Jones was sitting on his chest, slapping him repeatedly and insulting 'Doctor Who' when the Brit finally came to. An hour after that the diagnosis was in; the DHD was busted. Peabody said it looked like an egg that had been shot with a BB gun; Bacon swore it looked like a claymore had gone off on the side of the console. In any case, not all the pieces were there to fix. Peabody had made a few remarks about 'showing up that arrogant Canadian' and promised to have them out of there soon, but that had been literally days ago. Howell was tired of sleeping on the pine needle covered ground; no one had thought to bring tents since they were only supposed to be gone a few hours.

There was no civilization around the gate, which was odd in itself. Pegasus humans were generally more advanced than Milky Way humans, at least before the Wraith woke up and started frantically culling the local populations. You were more likely to encounter a Colonial America type population than a medieval hunter-gatherer tribe. There had even been a few Earth like civilizations, but those had been the Wraith's first target. Technology meant quality of living, which meant higher population, which meant more food. Nowadays Howell's team mostly saw ruins, with survivors scavenging for food and other

necessities.

But for some reason, this planet was untouched. No skyscrapers in the distance, no leather huts arranged around a bonfire, not even a broken down stone column or two. The gate had been plopped down in the forest and left, and it looked like the Ancients themselves might have been the last visitors. The Stargate was grown over with vines and huge tree roots, the DHD had been excavated before they could even tell what was wrong with it, and 'clearing' was actually just an inexplicable hole in the dense woodlands. They hadn't seen the sky yet; the canopy far above was more than thick enough to cover it.

"Colonel?" Howell had heard Captain Krag approaching, but still jumped a little at how loudly the young man spoke.

"What is it?"

"I was wondering why Atlantis hadn't sent out a search party yet, sir. We're long overdue now for our mission, and Major Bane is sure he got the radio call through, soâ€¦?" He trailed off and didn't finish.

"If Atlantis sent a Jumper or a MALP through after us they would have seen Wraith and darts. There is no reason to assume they know we were sent here in a wormhole jump, and even if they knew that, it would take days to search every gate nearby. We were going down the database list alphabetically; the gates closest to Atlantis are still unexplored." Howell reminded the kid. Captain Krag was only twenty three, but he was still the kid of the group. Howell was thirty, Jones was twenty five, and Bacon was older than dirt. Bane and Peabody were both around forty, though neither one would admit to their age for their own reasons. Jones had been the butt of every joke until he developed a good sense of humor, and then Krag had been dumped in Howell's lap. He'd been told to 'shape the kid up, or he'd be sent back to Earth on the supply run', and that was the exact quote. Howell still didn't know which 'he' Major Lorne had meant, but Howell didn't want to find out.

Captain Timothy Krag was a somewhat small guy, only standing at five foot ten inches. He had short brown hair that was so thick and unruly it looked uncombed even after the local barber back at Atlantis had tried to tame it. His pale white skin burned before it tanned, much like Peabody's, but somehow seemed to retain it's pale nature even after hours in the sunlight. He was almost frail looking, very nervous and jittery, and easily excitable. The poor kid had exactly two redeeming qualities: he could outshoot anyone on base, including Ronon and Sheppard, (no one had wanted to point this out either) and he could speak any language you could name. Howell was one of the few people who knew the Marine was an American born purebred Pole; his grandparents had actually spent time in concentration camps back in World War II. He was a likable enough kid in the way a younger brother grows on you, but he had issues. For one thing, he shook like a leaf in combat. Usually by the time he had to swap clips, he was out of the fight and needing to sit down. And he was had about as much self confidence as a Chihuahua at a German Sheppard convention.

"So, we're on our own? For now, I mean?" Krag asked again, twisting his hands around behind his back. Howell nodded solemnly.



"Don't worry. The most dangerous thing on this planet is Jones and if anybody can fix a busted DHD, it's Peabody." It wasn't exactly encouraging, but Krag still walked away after a shaky salute.

\* \* \*

><p>Nightfall came, and Bacon had decided to build a 'southern style candle' which was basically the biggest bonfire he could get going with what branches and bits of bark he could scrape together. The light was more than enough for Peabody to work by, but there were more and more British cuss words being growled and less and less progress.<p>

"Where's the bloodyâ€| What on Earth did the wankersâ€| How the bloodyâ€|?" Howell tried to tune him out and Bane politely suggested he keep it down to avoid making the rest of the boys nervous.

"It's not looking good sir." Major Bane said needlessly as Howell sharpened another wooden stake.

"I noticed that. Pass me that branch, will you?"

"Spears, sir?" Bane asked suspiciously, glancing at the growing pile of four foot wooden stakes sharpened to a fine point laying beside the Colonel.

"Yes. We only have so many bullets, they'd be useful in hand-to-hand combat, and I'm bored." Howell admitted sheepishly. Bane nodded and smiled in a weird sort of way. That is to say, not at all, but the thought was there.

"I don't think there are too many card games left to play, and they're starting to wager rocks now that Bacon won all the candy and gum." Bane noted, glancing over at the fallen log turned casino.

"Poor saps. They should have known Bacon learned Poker before he could read." Howell said ruefully as he worked on another spear. He was being careful to keep his knife sharp as well; he'd found an excellent whetstone on the small hill he'd been sitting on.

"I've been thinkingâ€|"

"Bane, I'd be more than a little surprised if you stopped." Howell cut in, actually forcing a small smile to appear on Bane's face this time.

"â€|that if we haven't been found yet, the chances are getting smaller and smaller that we will be found."

"I've been thinking the same. Like I just told Krag, Atlantis has no reason to think we're still alive." Howell said, getting one final slice off of the large stick. He threw it to the growing pile and reached for another.

"It doesn't look good. We've got enough MRE's for another day. No more."

"Even rationing?" Howell asked quickly, alarmed that he hadn't

thought about that before.

"Even rationing. Bacon's been talking about hunting, and I have a fewâ€¦" He slowly trailed off, and the chatter from the card game followed suit. It took Howell a minute to realize why; an orange glow had lit up the entire forest, and it was coming from behind him.

Colonel Howell leapt to his feet and grabbed his since un-jammed rifle.

"Krag! Jones! Stay here with Peabody and cover our rear. Bacon, Bane, you're with me!" Howell shouted. They all scrambled into position as Howell tucked a few spears into his backpack and jumped off the rocky crag. Bacon and Bane were soon behind him and the trio ran into the woods, rifles leveled.

There were no birds in the woods that they had seen, but even the insects had died down at the sight of the orange glow illuminating the forest. It was coming from behind the makeshift camp, facing the gate, and it was bright enough Howell had to squint to see the ground in front of him.

All of a sudden, the lights died off completely. The three Marines stopped short and dove for cover instinctively, rifles still leveled.

"What was that?" Bacon hissed, searching the horizon as he spoke.

"Almost looked like the exhaust manifold off of a battle cruiser to me, sir." Bane suggested, looking sideways at Howell. Had they really sent the Daedalus or the Apollo to come and get them?

"Alright, fan out. Bane, take the right, Bacon, go left. I'll work my way down the middle and see if we can figure out who or what that was. I'd be willing to bet it's not Wraith, but there are still a lot of possibilities that won't end well for us. If all else fails, head for the gate. Hopefully Peabody will have figured out something. Clear?" Howell demanded, looking straight at Bane as he spoke. Bane had issues with following orders that required leaving Howell behind, and it had caused problems before.

This time, for whatever reason, Bane agreed easily enough, and Bacon was uncharacteristically quiet. The three moved off into the woods, all heading for the source of the strange lights.

It took Howell close to five minutes to finally come to the edge of the woods. If the source of the lights really had been an engine, the thing must have been running hot. The grass was scorched and wilted, and one giant tree had been reduced to charcoal while still managing to stay upright. The residual heat of the burningâ€¦ whatever it was, hit Howell like a brick wall as he approached. He soon stripped off his jacket and strapped his bullet proof vest over his T-shirt before continuing.

As he passed the now torched tree, Howell realized it was an engine that had barbequed the woods, but not one he recognized. The thing was massive; almost as big as a Daedalus class ship, but the engines were elongated and jutting out of the back of the craft. With rifle

in hand, he walked around the outer edge of the vessel, being mindful for force-fields or angry crewmembers appearing out of no where. SG-1 and Colonel Sheppard's team had seen stranger, and Howell did not want to wake up tied to a chair or hanging from the ceiling in some villain's lair.

As it turned out, there was no one around. Howell made it around to the port side of the huge ship without meeting any resistance, growing more confused and on edge as he did so. As he stepped on a step that snapped annoyingly, three figures jumped out of an airlock, weapons raised!

"Hold it right there!" A strong, feminine voice ordered. There were much larger, obviously male figures were beside her, unmoving.

"Drop your weapons, now!" She demanded, taking a step closer. Howell held out his hands innocently before responding.

"Same to you." He shot back. He could see her head cock to one side, as if she were amused at what he'd said, but he couldn't see her face because of the bright light silhouetting her.

"Excuse me?"

"I said, same to you. Drop your weapons and we can talk like adults." Howell said in an icy tone. His rifle stayed clipped to his vest, but his hands were raised. The woman's friends seemed to look to her for orders.

"In case you haven't noticed there, handsome, we've got you covered." The woman pointed out, this time taking a slightly more seductive tone.

"In case you haven't noticed there, gorgeous, we've got you covered." They hadn't agreed on a signal, but Bacon and Bane still got the idea. Bane appeared behind the three aliens, Bacon jumped out of the woods to the left, and both moved to disarm them as Howell smiled.

"Now, let's all just all just drop the guns and we can talk like adults. See? Not so hard." Howell was walking forward as he spoke, and personally disarmed the woman in front of him. The gun was a handheld pistol of a familiar design, and Bane figured out how to dim the light blinding him, Howell figured out who the strangers were.

"You must be Larrin."

### 3. Joining Forces

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><p>Colonel Howell narrowed his eyes and took a deep breath. In front of him, lined up against the still warm hull of the Traveler's vessel, was the infamous Captain Larrin. And two other guys. Majors Bane and Bacon were on either side of Howell, weapons raised. They hadn't recognized the strangers, and it was only because of the mission report Colonel Sheppard had written that Howell knew the woman.<p>

"Well this is fun. Now I know why Sheppard whines so much when I tie him upâ€| " Larrin said in a lazy tone. Bane's head jerked back and he shot a weird look at Howell, obviously thinking of something else.

"You pointed the gun at me first. Fair is fair." Howell shot back in the same tone. He had all three of their gun belts in his hand, which he was reluctant to give back. Ronon Dex had a gun very similar to the Traveler's choice weapon, and it was the envy of the entire base. No matter how the day ended, he wanted to have one of those guns with him when it was all said and done.

"You approached my ship unannounced. What's a girl to do but grab a few guns and go out to meet you?" Larrin said in a sickeningly sweet tone.

"You landed on our planet and nearly fried our camp. Again, fair's fair. Now why haven't more of your people come streaming out that door to stun and kidnap us? I understand that's how you folks do business." Howell asked, nodding at the airlock door beside the woman. Larrin's expression changed, and she suddenly looked much older and much weaker.

"Our cameras are out on this side. And they've all got more important things to do." She suddenly perked up a little bit as she thought of a better comeback. "Has Sheppard been telling stories about me and how I treat my guests?"

Suddenly Bacon realized who they were and a light bulb seemed to appear over his head. "OH! You're the hot alien chick that tied up Colonel Sheppard and did bad things to him! I remember that now! "

Howell almost choked at Bacon's choice of words, and Larrin got a sour look on her face. "'Hot alien chick'? I think I prefer gorgeousâ€|" She said as she turned to look at Howell again. Her two bodyguards remained totally expressionless, but looked ready to pounce at the first sign of trouble. The men were huge; gorillas would have nodded respectfully at the twin giants.

"Cut the crap. Why are you here and what do you want?" Colonel Howell demanded, nodding at Larrin's ship.

"We're here because we almost crashed. Our ship is badly damaged and we needed to set down. All we want is to use the Stargate." She said in an icy tone.

"Get in line." Howell said with a sigh. "The DHD's toast. No one's going anywhere." Howell explained, carefully leaving out the part where he had three other men back at the gate.

"What?" Larrin looked honestly surprised this time, and her two guards looked nervously in her direction. She ran a hand through her wavy brown hair and spun around on her heel, looking ready to blow a gasket. She was wearing ripped leather pants and an old leather jacket that had seen better days with thick combat boots, and still she didn't look bad. Howell tried to put that out of his mind as he watched her pace.

"That's just great." She kept pacing back and forth, but stopped suddenly as something else occurred to her.

"Hey wait, you're Atlanteans, right? What are you guys still doing here?" Larrin demanded, seeming to forget that she was being held at gunpoint and walking straight up to Howell.

"What do you mean still doing here?" Howell demanded, holding up a hand to stop Bacon from shooting her. Bane took a step back to be out of arm's reach and kept his weapon trained on the other two men.

"I mean what are you still doing in Pegasus? Oh, if you're trapped here, then you don't know?" She asked, looking Howell up and down as if he'd suddenly grown a second head.

"Don't know what?"

"Atlantis is gone. We picked up the entire city leaving this galaxy yesterday."

\* \* \*

><p>The news had hit Bacon hard, and probably Bane too, though he didn't show it. Somehow it didn't click with Howell yet. Maybe the mean-tempered woman thought it was a fun prank, maybe she was lying out of pure malicious with some other agenda, or maybe her sensors were just wrong. The whole ship seemed to be falling apart, after all. But in any case, they were still trapped.<p>

Howell had reluctantly given the Travelers their guns back and left in peace, agreeing to meet up again soon. They were the only humans on the planet and would definitely need each other to get off it; or at least that's what Howell had told her. He doubted the Travelers would be kind enough to wait for his team if they got their ship running, but he also wasn't sure they would leave the Marines behind just out of spite.

The six of them were all standing around the dying bonfire, discussing the odd turn of events. Howell had filled the other three in on the short conversation he'd had with Captain Larrin.

"So, they've got a ship? That's good, right?" Krag asked meekly. Bacon rolled his eyes and smacked the kid's shoulder.

"No dipstick, they'd got a broken ship! Listen better next time!"

"They have a ship, damaged or not, and it might be useful. Peabody, tell me you've made progress on this DHD." Howell fairly ordered.

"If you insist. 'I've made progress on this DHD'." Percy said, mimicking Howell's voice. Major Bane shot him a dangerous look, and his voice took on a more civil tone.

"Look, if I had another DHD in full working order just for parts I might not be able to fix this blasted thing. It is totally and completely dead. Some of the components are literally welded to the outside casing, and said parts are broken in half. I was convinced I could make it work just once to send us on our merry way, but now I'm not so sure. To be perfectly frank, I don't know how it was damaged, and I don't know how to fix it. It should be working now, but when I try to activate even a single Chevron, nothing happens!" To demonstrate, he walked over to the offending device and tapped a few buttons.

"See? Nothing. Not even a glimmer of power, even though the power unit is still intact. I have tried everything I could think of so far, and I do not believe it is possible to get it working. I am sorry." Peabody finished his rant and crossed his arms.

"Don't be. I kind of expected that." Howell told him, taking a deep breath. "But it does mean you may have another job. If that gate can't get us home, I don't see any other options than to try and join the Travelers." He admitted. Bane nodded solemnly, Bacon shrugged, while Jones silently mouthed a 'yeah' and pumped his fist in the air. Krag and Peabody looked indifferent.

"So I'm going to need you to offer your services to the engineers back at their ship." Howell continued, nodding to Peabody again. He slumped his shoulders and sighed pathetically, running his hands through his greasy red hair as he spoke.

"That's just bloody lovely. My friend Doctor Zelenka said their engines are about as logical and easy to work with as the women that run the blasted engines."

"Well, do your best. I'm not even sure they'll want our help. We seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot already. So I want you all on your best behavior when we go and meet them again." He directed this comment solely to Jones, who was grinning broadly and nodding quickly.

"Oh yes sir. Be nice and polite and decent to the smokin' hot Amazon warrior aliens. Got it. Sir." Bane reached over and smacked him upside his head, and the stupid grin disappeared.

"I'll behave sir." He said in a defeated tone.

"Good. Let's move; I don't want to get left behind."

The Marines all moved at a good pace through the woods, while Peabody panted and loped along like a praying mantis running a marathon. Major Jones forgot his promise immediately and kept the furious scientist running by chanting, "Hurry up, PeePee!"

Colonel Howell and Major Bacon took the lead, talking quietly as the rest followed.

"I don't know that I trust them, sir." Bacon said with a suspicious look on his face. It

was a small wonder that the man was such a good poker player because no matter what thought crossed his mind, it came out in his facial expressions.

"I know that I don't. But we don't have many other options." Howell reminded him.

"Well, we could always just shoot the lot of 'em and take their fancy ship." Bacon suggested, his tone deadly serious. He saw the look on Howell's face and quickly corrected himself.

"I mean stun! I think Krag has a Wraith stunner somewhere in his bag, we could justâ€¦"

"I think we should talk to them first."

"Good idea sir." Bacon said, nodding firmly. He wasn't a huge man, but anyone with eyes knew he was powerful. He stood at six foot even, with short brownish gray hair and a continual line of stubble along his jaw. The man could shave at seven A.M. and have a full beard and mustache by noon, but somehow he seemed to keep it at just stubble by sheer willpower. Howell had never seen the man clean shaven or with the full beard; but in the three years Howell had known him, he'd never been without the coarse stubble. His skin was brown and leathery like a burlap bag left to bake in the sun, and sometimes Howell thought he'd gotten heat stroke one too many times back in Alabama. The old southern boy could cuss and spit like he invented the sports, and they were sports in his book, but was almost comically shy around women. His reaction to Larrin surprised Howell; he considered reminding the older man that Larrin was in fact female.

"So we just walk up and offer our services like a door-to-door hooker? That don't seem right to me, sir." Bacon said with a straight face. Howell laughed quietly and had to stop to make sure he heard the man right.

"Door-to-door hooker? Where in Alabama did you live again, Bacon?"

"Everywhere sir. Everywhere." Oakie Earl Bacon was his full name, but he only answered to Bacon. Any story he had about his hometown usually ended in 'and we all ended up pissin' in the river and chewin' day-old tobacco.' Howell had no idea what meaning that held for the old southerner, but he used it pretty frequently.

They all kept moving, and eventually made it back to the Traveler ship. Peabody promptly collapsed onto the grass with Jones still laughing at him, while the rest stood anxiously behind Howell.

He looked for a door bell or some kind of console to open it, but nothing obvious presented itself. He finally ended up pounding his fist against the steel plated airlock and hoped someone inside would hear.

He'd barely finished knocking when the door opened with a hiss of air, and one of the men he'd seen earlier poked his head out.

"What do you want?" He asked in an incredibly deep voice. Howell was

taken aback at the casualness of the man's question.

"We're here to talk to Captain Larrin."

"Boss is busy. Come back later." The huge man started to close the door, but Howell stopped him.

"Tell her we're here and want to talk. She'll come." Howell said forcefully. The man grunted and promptly shut the door in the Howell's face.

About the time Howell had decided he wasn't coming back, the airlock swished open again.

"Boss says come in." The huge man stepped aside and ushered the Marines onboard, still staring at Howell. First the Colonel, and then the rest of the group climbed up into the ship's airlock, the wave of heat and sound disorienting them.

The forest had a cool breeze to it that felt very comfortable. The only sound's were coming from the few insects that lived in the canopy above them. The Traveler's ship, however, was a dizzying maze of sight, sound, and even smell.

The air had obviously been circulated through the vents for months prior and smelled like sweat and oil. The walls and floor were covered in wiring and other spare parts Howell couldn't begin to identify. All of the speakers on board the ship seemed to be blaring warnings and sirens, and Howell could hardly hear himself think. They were walking down a long hallway, and eventually the guard pushed past them to take the lead.

For what seemed like hours they wandered around the ship until they finally wound up in a large room that must have been something like a bridge. There were several control consoles on the far end of the room, a huge chair that seemed to be where the pilot sat, and in front of them was a huge metal table filled with diagrams and blueprints.

The real item of interest in the room was Larrin herself, bending over the table to examine a paper more carefully, showing off her full and leather-bound figure.

"Yesâ€|?" Larrin asked in a drawn out tone, still not looking up at the Marines as they entered. Or at least Howell thought they had entered; the door shut promptly behind him as he walked over the threshold, and he was alone with the captain.

"You know why I'm here." Howell finally managed to say, trying hard to look at the woman's face. She flipped her hair over her shoulder and walked boldly up to him, stopping inches from his face.

"I do?"

"The gate is toast. Your ship is the only way off this planet. We have a scientist who's pretty good with Ancient technology and is willing to take a look at your engines. If you allow us to go with you to the next world with a gate, that is." Howell stated firmly, staring the woman in the eye.



"Oh really? And if I refuse?" She'd crossed her arms and jutted out her hip at what must have been a painful angle, while also smiling seductively up at him. Howell got lost in her eyes for exactly four seconds, he counted, and then snapped.

"We're here to help you so you can help us. Stop flirting and be serious." Howell stated in a level tone, taking a step backwards.

"Fine. Be like that. My engines are toast too. We're not getting very far, if we get off the ground at all. If your boy thinks he knows our tech better than we do, I'll have someone show him to engineering. The rest of you can amuse yourselves elsewhere; I'm busy at the moment." With that, she turned on her heel and returned to her table full of plans, standing in exactly the same position. It was eerie enough that Howell considered the possibility that he hadn't really spoken yet and that the last conversation had happened in his head.

#### 4. Negotiations

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**><p>**Peabody was shown to Engineering, with Captain Krag in tow for protection, and he supposedly got to work. Howell figured that as nervous as Krag was, if there was a problem, he'd hear about it.**<p>**

The four remaining Marines were taken to the mess hall for a late dinner of purple gelatin like stuff and dehydrated fruit. Howell decided to donate that last few MRE's they had as a sign of good faith, and the skinny male cook seemed thrilled to get them.

Howell, Bacon, Jones and Bane all sat at a long metal table, eating slowly and eyeing the other crew members. Howell thought he had heard that Traveler ships carried the Traveler people; he'd been expecting women and children to more prevalent, but all he saw were hardened crew and security. All carried the famous guns and ample ammunition; if the Marines had wanted to fight their way out, they'd have been stains by the time they hit the door to the mess hall.

As Howell finished his purple slim, he noticed Larrin walk into the room whisper in someone's ear, and then walk quickly to the food line.

Bane caught his stare and turned around to see what he was looking at, while Jones and Bacon arm wrestled. The two southerners could have been father and son; they sure acted like it. Bane was like the responsible adult that kept them in line, and Howell was glad someone besides himself was watching the two trouble makers.

As he and Bane stared on, Larrin took her tray to an enclosed area of the mess hall labeled 'officers only'. Bane looked at the sign, and then back at Howell with an ornery look in his eye.

"Technically speaking, sir," Bane started, his tone of voice very diplomatic. "â€| you \_are\_ an officer."

Howell chewed slowly, rolling the decision around in his mind.

"She's dangerous."

"Very." Bane agreed.

"But if she's right about Atlantis really being goneâ€|"

"We ought to know more." Bane finished. Howell nodded and started to stand up.

"Be careful sir." Bane added quickly, as if he was about to walk into a den of lions.

"I'll be fine." Jones and Bacon both started to stand up and follow Howell with eager looks, but Bane silently shook his head and made them sit down again.

"May I come in?" Howell asked, standing in the doorway to the Larrin's private dining room.

"If I say no will you go away?" She asked over a mouthful of raisins. Howell smiled sarcastically and sat down across from her.

"A few hours ago you told me that Atlantis, the city of the Ancestors, containing the forward base of my people and the only Stargate in the galaxy that can send me and my people home, flew off into the night. Care to elaborate on that last part?" Howell asked, staring hard the woman. She nodded slowly, stared into empty space, and kept eating.

"No."

"Let me rephrase that. My people and my only way home to my family is supposedly vanished without a trace; you watched them go. Elaborate." He said in a much more forceful tone. Larrin dropped her fork loudly and leaned back in her chair, drawing the attention of everyone in the room beyond.

"Ten hours ago while my engines were going critical and every alarm on my ship was going offâ€|"

"Was?" Howell asked, gesturing towards the speakers still sounding off a shrill whistle, making conversation difficult.

"â€| and on top of that, I was avoiding a Wraith cruiser while looking for a good place to collect food and water for my people. I remembered that Atlantis had a few drones left in her armory and thought Sheppard might be good for another favor." As if she had done it mentally, the alarms all died, or were at least lowered, and he could hear her more clearly.

"When we got there the planet was empty. I thought it was a mistake at first, so I recalibrated my sensors. As I did, I saw a shape that looked awfully like your precious city entering a \_wormhole\_. It looked like a freaking Stargate had been dialed, but there was no gate! The city vanished, and I ran another quick scan. I picked up what I think was Atlantis leaving the galaxy. Any more questions you want to ask?" Larrin demanded, a tired look in her eyes.

"I can tell you're tired." Howell stated softly. "I can tell you're hungry. No offense but this stuff tastes like dirt. I can tell you're worried about your people. So let me ask you." Howell slowly rose from his seat and got nose to nose with the woman.

"\_How do you think \_I \_feel?\_" Howell was livid with anger, and it all came out at once. He wasn't shouting, but his voice shook with rage.

"I am sorry you're having a bad day. Or week. Or month. But bad as it is, you have a ship. I have five men and few rounds of ammo. I need your help." Howell admitted, hoping no one else could hear them. "If you knew me at all, you'd know that I \_never\_ ask for help. Well, I'm asking. Not for me, but for my people. I have five men I am sworn to protect and see home safely. I will do whatever must to ensure my people are safe. If that means dealing with you, so be it. If that means flagging down a Wraith hive ship and killing the crew single handedly and stealing \_their\_ ship, so be it! I will do whatever I have to." Howell finally sat down, still trying to control his anger.

Both leaders stared at each other, as if waiting for the other to move. It was practically a staring contest between the two. Finally, Larrin broke the tense silence.

"I'm sorry that you're people are in trouble. The only other thing I can tell you is that I picked up a strange transmission about a day before that. We like to monitor Wraith channels for any useful info. We picked up a set of coordinates that we figure must be Earth's. Granted I don't know the exact coordinates for your home world, but then again, what else would get the Wraith so excited? That's \_all\_ I can tell you." Larrin finished, finally starting to seem human to Howell. She was looking down at her tray of food, picking at a what might have been dried apples with her fork.

"Captain Krag, come in." Howell said suddenly into his radio.

"Yes sir?"

"How's progress in the engine room?" He asked, still staring at Larrin.

"Well sir, we've identified the problem, I think, which is progress in itself. But I think I better let Peabody explain the rest, and he'sâ€¦ indisposed at the moment."

"Indisposed?" Howell asked curiously.

"Jammed up inside a tube and stuck so tightly we've slathered him in grease trying to pull him out." As he and Larrin were listening, a long stream of cuss words in a British accent was heard over the

radio.

"Looks like he's outâ€¦ I gotta go sir." The radio died and Howell cleared his throat.

"That is all \_I \_can tell \_you\_."

"Maybe. \_Maybe\_ we work together for a while before I dump you and your Marines on a habitable planet. I might even make it a planet with a gate. That's the best I can offer you." Larrin told him, leaning forward onto the table and folding her hands. Howell imitated the move and the voice perfectly.

"And \_maybe\_ I have my people get your ship off the ground. I might even let you keep it after you drop us off at a location of our choosing."

Larrin smiled seductively, or maybe it was her normal smile that annoyed Howell so much, and raised her eyebrows at him.

"We have a deal. Now let me finish my meal in peace, please." She popped a dried blueberry into her mouth and sat back down, acting again as if Howell had never spoken in the first place.

"See you around, handsome." As he cleared the doorway, he heard that comment from behind him, quiet enough that only he heard it. He tried not to blush as he went back to talk to Bane.

It was almost insulting, or maybe patronizing, that Larrin flirted so heavily with him. He knew he was nothing special. He had short black hair in a military crew-cut, a thick jaw and deep set eyes. He was by no means 'handsome'. He was tall, over six foot, and being a Marine meant he was somewhat in shape, though he enjoyed working out on his off time. He was not male model, and he was no Colonel Sheppard. If the woman had done the same routine with John Sheppard, than there was no doubt in John Howell's mind that it was all an act.

It surprised him how much he cared about that, and put it out of his mind quickly. He told Major Bane that he was going to check on Krag and Peabody, while Jones and Bacon challenged other members of the Traveler crew to arm wrestling matches.

"You're leaving me alone with these two?" Bane asked, his voice almost pathetic. Howell shrugged and kept walking, watching as a huge brunette woman plopped down across from Jones.

"Okay, hold on, wait ow ow ow!" Jones' voice got higher and higher as the woman flattened his arm against the table, making Howell crack a smile as he left the room.

\* \* \*

><p>Peabody was finally out of the tube, his pants and boots covered in black grease. Captain Krag watched the entire ordeal happen, trying to figure out what to do. He had been absolutely miserable ever since he'd signed up for Colonel Howell's team. Colonel Howell was a good man, but a hard man to follow. He was a hero, at least in Krag's eyes. If he said something was going to happen, it happened. Period. End of story. Most of the time, Krag couldn't figure what <em>to<em> say, let alone how to make that actually happen. He'd been

told to escort Peabody to the engine room and protect once there; Timothy Krag figured out quickly that it was busy work. He wasn't trusted in the mess hall with the other officers, he wasn't allowed to watch the gate alone, he was supposed to watch Peabody crawl around a massive engine and pretend to know how it worked. That ticked Krag off the most. Sure, Peabody was brilliant. He could program the entire Atlantis mainframe from his quarters. He was secretly asked to look over the quarantine protocol McKay had broken after McKay had 'fixed' it. But at the end of the day, he knew next to nothing about practical engineering. You have a computer or an Ancient device that needed to be reverse engineered, over say, a week? Peabody is your guy.

But crawling around tight engineering spaces looking for an overloaded power coupling? He was beyond useless. But he wasn't afraid to admit it, Timothy Krag did not have the guts to stand up and say that. The only one he ever spoke his mind to was Howell, and he was constantly afraid of sounding foolish.

Another factor in Krag's hesitance was the fact that Traveler leadership tended to be utterly feminine in nature. Every high ranking officer, from the captains to the security chiefs, were women. And Krag had seen three, maybe four ugly women onboard, and even they weren't bad. Just not as stunningly beautiful as the others. And the head engineer of this vessel was definitely in the latter category.

She was short but not petite; Krag could see the muscles rippling under her ripped uniform. Her long blonde hair was tied into a tight braid and her tanned complexion reminded Krag of a few Polish girls he'd met on trips to visit family back in Poland.

"Are you sure you're alright? You're still shaking." The blonde woman knelt down to look at the Brit who was still wiping the grease off.

"I'mâ€¦ fineâ€¦" He stuttered, wiping a rag furiously on his pant legs. He was apparently claustrophobic.

"Well, did you see where the conduit is broken?" She demanded, moving aside another bundle of wires to get a better look at Peabody.

"I don't knowâ€¦ that it's a conduit that's brokenâ€¦" Peabody stuttered, causing the woman to roll her eyes. Without realizing it, Krag started speaking.

"Obviously it's a broken conduit! The reactors are outputting more than enough power and the diffusers are functioning properly, but the exhaust manifold is overheating. The engines are getting too much power on one end and not enough on the other, which means a broken conduit. If it wasn't in that tube, then it must be somewhere in that panel." Krag gushed, pointing at a roof panel behind the chief engineer. As soon as he finished speaking, he practically swallowed his tongue. Peabody finally stopped quivering, two other nearby crewmembers nodded in agreement, and most importantly, the pretty blonde woman stood up and looked at Krag for the first time.

"You. What's your name?" She demanded, folding her arms as she studied him. Krag promptly lost his nerve and started to stutter.

"Me? Oh, uh, I'm Tim. I mean Timothy, is my full name, most people, I guess my rank isâ€¦"

"His name is Captain Timothy Krag." Peabody stated flatly, obviously putout. The blonde woman smiled disarmingly, which all but floored Krag, and introduced herself.

"Well, nice to meet you, Captain Timothy Krag. Do you have your own ship?"

"What? Oh, no, uh, I'm not that kindâ€¦"

"Our ranks are different than yours. He's the lowest ranking Marine in our squad." Peabody explained again, making Krag blush all the more.

"He was right, you know." She said accusingly, sneering at Peabody. "And he's cute too. Come on, help me up there." The woman strode quickly over to the wall under the panel Krag had pointed at and waited patiently. He finally took a hint and moved to give her a boost up.

Krag cupped his hands and boosted the woman up, staring up at the ceiling panel she was messing with. She also had a very full figure, which he tried not to stare at.

"Ah, this is the one panel in here bolted on." She deftly leapt back down to the floor and looked back at Krag.

"My name's Starling. People call me Star. I could use your help if you're not busy doing anything else." She shot a quick look over at Peabody, who was still cleaning the grease off of his boots. Krag took a deep breath and mustered an intelligent response.

"I'd love to."

## 5. We're Still Stuck

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><p>Captain Krag was notoriously nervous and jittery around women. Major Bacon loved to harass him about it. It wasn't something he could control or even explain; if there was a woman present, and she was at least somewhat attractive, his brain just shut down. Remembering his name was a challenge.<p>

But for the first time, well, ever, Timothy Krag was talking and working with a woman and he was doing it intelligently.

"Is that converter supposed to be just hanging on a zip-tie like that?" Krag asked as he swung from the makeshift harness. Chief engineer Starling, or Star, as she preferred to be called, merely shrugged in response.

"I didn't do it, but someone did, and it's held so far. Pass me the big set of wire cutters, this thing is really tough." She explained, grunting with the effort of trying to remove the offending wire.

"Here, let me try." Krag swung over, trying not to hit the girl in midair, and barely caught himself on the edge of the panel. They were suspended from the ceiling of the huge engine room, only a few feet above a revolving pneumatic-like cylinder. The goal was to disengage and remove the faulty power coupling, but it was so embedded in the rat's nest of wiring and tubing that it was taking work to get it loose.

"Oh, my hero!" Star joked, moving out of the way for the somewhat frail looking Marine. Krag was not a physically intimidating person; if he weighed over a hundred pounds it was because he had sand in his boots.

"Manâ€¦ this is really thickâ€¦" Krag grunted, manhandling the wire cutters around the thick metal cable.

"So you're a Marine, right? What is that, exactly?" Star asked conversationally, hanging from her harness almost artistically. She looked like a model posing on a hammock for a photo shoot instead of an engineer dangling above heavy machinery.

"Marine's are soldiers that work with the Navy, mostly. We're delivered to the battlegrounds by whatever ship we can find." Krag explained as he strained against the cable.

"Oh that's cool. On Traveler ships we call those 'security guards'." Star said in a completely innocent tone. Krag got a sour look on his face and almost dropped the wire cutters.

"We're a little more complicated than security. On my world Marines are the toughest of the tough. Special Forces, that kind of thing. We aren't just 'security'." While he was speaking, he finally mustered enough force to snap the wire. The power coupling, deactivated hours prior, fell limply onto his shoulders.

"I'm just messing with you Timmy!" Star laughed, whisked the faulty coupling off of his shoulders and propelled herself back down to the floor. Captain Krag had to take a deep breath to avoid losing his temper. The girl was beautiful, and only a couple of years younger than him. She was also only slightly amused with him; not what he was hoping for.

"Having fun?" Percy Peabody was sitting on a stack of spare deck panels as Krag finally made it down to the floor. Peabody was still very greasy and sweating profusely in the heat of the tight engineering spaces.

In contrast, Krag had stripped down to his T-shirt, leaving his gear in the hallway with the rest of the weapons. The Travelers security insisted they leave all weapons near the airlock so there wouldn't be

any more incidents. So Krag was wearing only his combat boots, thick camouflage pants, and the black T-shirt. If he was half as well built as Jones or Bane, he wouldn't have minded, but he was fairly soaked in sweat, hadn't showered in days, and he had about as muscle tone as Gollum from Lord of the Rings. Not an impressive in the slightest.

"What do you mean?" Krag asked he unclipped himself from the harness they'd used to get at the broken coupling.

"Having fun showing off your secret engineering skills? How long were you going to let me work on that blasted DHD before you decided to mention this particular skill set?" Peabody demanded, getting face to face with the Marine. Krag immediately stepped back and looked down out of habit.

"Look, I uh, I didn't mean to I don't really know all that much about uh, the uh, Ancient stuff, but this"

"And I for one am not buying this poor, sad 'puppy with a gimpy leg' attitude either! You don't seem so stuttering and bumbling when working with our resident super model!" Peabody fairly shouted.

What neither Peabody nor Krag had realized was that Colonel Howell had finally finished his conversation with Larrin and wound up in Engineering. He and Star were standing in the doorway discussing the faulty part when they overheard the one-sided debate.

Krag was about to say something else when Peabody interrupted him, again.

"How are you even a Marine? Do they grow those differently in America, or are you just the runt of the litter? A Captain in the U.S. Marine Corps! More like a boy scout missing his troop!"

As the Brit was going off, Krag just nodded in agreement. He didn't say a word in his defense, which confused Star, and infuriated Howell.

"Excuse me!" Howell boomed. Everyone in the room stopped. Star stepped aside, three men dropped their tools and gathered around to watch, and Krag stood at attention. Even Peabody realized he'd crossed the line.

"You have no right." Howell growled, walking unflinchingly up to the smaller scientist. Peabody wouldn't make eye contact and kept fidgeting with his hands, much like what Krag had been doing.

"You have no right to call out my men on who or what they are. I decide which men I keep. I worry about their abilities. We all have our stories. All of us." Howell stated forcefully, his gaze ripping into Peabody's sweaty face. He still wouldn't look the military man in the eye.

"Since you seem so interested, and considering Krag's politeness in not ripping you apart, I'll sum it up for you. Captain Timothy Krag was assigned to SG-8. He wasn't a Captain then; he was fresh out of boot camp. He witnessed his entire squad massacred by Baal troops, and was held hostage for eight days before he escaped. He was not rescued, he escaped. He then stole and repaired a cargo ship and flew



it out of Goa'uld space and dropped off eight other prisoners, all in critical condition, at a Tok'Ra world. He barely lived through the ordeal, but begged to be a part of the Atlantis Expedition. He was promoted, awarded a Medal of Honor, and shipped out to Atlantis with the rest of the team. He has been in this galaxy longer than you or I, and he is a valuable member of my team." Howell was out of breath when he finished his story, but still just as angry.

"If you force me to embarrass us in front of our hosts, or insult a member of my team, ever again, I will leave you on the first abandoned world we come across and you can be as self important as you want. Is that clear?" Howell demanded. You could have heard a pin drop in the room. The machinery itself seemed to die down in respect.

"Yesâ€| sir." Peabody squeaked out, blinking furiously and looking down at his feet.

"Good. As it turns out, rebuilding a cargo ship's engines twice over on a ten hour flight tends to give you some working knowledge about engines. And I don't seem to remember you asking for help with the DHD, Peabody. In fact I distinctly remember you telling my name to 'stay the bloody hell away from your work'."

"Yes sir." Peabody was a little more collected that time, and quietly excused himself from the room. Where he went Howell neither knew nor cared. He had take several deep breaths before he felt comfortable speaking again. When he wasn't seeing red in his vision, he turned to Krag.

"You alright soldier?"

Krag was still standing at attention, looking straight up at Howell. "Yes sir."

"Good. I understand you've made progress?"

"Yes sir. I think we've identified the faulty component, but there's another problem." Krag said in a somewhat stronger voice. It was rare that Howell heard him speak so clearly; he wondered what had inspired the change.

"What's that?"

"This particular part can't be repaired; it has to be replaced. I've been talking with Starâ€| I mean, Chief Engineer Starling, and she says that her people have these in fairly good supply, but without the gateâ€|"

"We're still stuck." Howell finished, sighing heavily. He trusted Krag on what he'd said, but felt the need to ask anyway. "Do you agree ma'am?"

Star had been looking down and almost anywhere but where the two men were talking, but had obviously been listening. "Completely. He's actually been a big help; can I keep him? Just for a little while, I mean?" Her voice reminded Howell of a small child asking for a puppy.

"Yes, if he's needed. I'll be in radio contact if you need anything;

in the meantime, I'm going to go report your progress to Captain Larrin."

"Oh good; I was afraid I'd have to do it. Good luck!" Star said cheerfully, standing over by Krag again. He straightened up noticeably and blushed a shade redder as she rested her arm on his shoulder. Howell bit back his smile, nodded respectfully, and stepped out of the tight room.

\* \* \*

><p>"That bad huh? Star won't even try to fix it?" Larrin asked lazily, leaning back in her chair and rubbing her temples. They were in her small office behind the bridge, with Howell standing across from her table full of reports.<p>

"From what my engineer told me, it's not a 'fix it and move on' kind of situation. You almost blew out your engines on your descent. This coupling was the sole reason for that, and it needs to be replaced. Unfortunately the gate is also broken, and no amount of spare parts will fix it. I believe Peabody phrased it as, 'There's just enough of it left to fool unsuspecting travelers, but not enough to actually do anything besides look pretty'." Howell reported, purposely seeming to be more interested in the papers on the table than the woman sitting across from him. The woman's attitude was starting to get annoying and he felt it was time for payback.

"So to summarize, we're both stuck here. Any bright ideas?" Howell asked, picking up a folder with the name 'Atlantis' written at the top.

"A few, actually." Larrin jumped up, snatched the folder away, and crossed her arms again.

"Traveler tech doesn't always work as intended. We've been running on spare parts and old pieces of junk since before your pretty little Marines ever set foot in this galaxy." Larrin lectured in a tone so condescending Howell bristled in anger.

"As it happens there's a planet with a gate on it not too far from here. It's the sub-lights that down; the hyper drive works fine. And Sheppard told a friend of mine about those rogue Asgards you had so much trouble with. They got pretty good with hyper-space flying; maybe some of my boys can do the same." Larrin threw the folder onto stack of other papers and turned back to Howell with a challenging look in her eye.

"My people use tablets." He said with a hint of derision.

"So do mine. I'm an old-school kind of girl. Didn't Sheppard mention that?" She asked with an almost sincere sound to her voice, leaning on the table in front of her.

"He mostly talked about the rope and uncomfortable chairs."

"Oh, I hope I didn't break the poor man. Are you all so delicate?"

Howell was leaning on the table too now, and getting angrier by the second. Mostly because he'd run out of comebacks.

"Get your ship off the ground. After that we can gate to your world andâ€¦"

"Not going to happen." Larrin suddenly plopped down on her chair and kicked her feet up onto the table's edge. Howell swallowed hard and glared down at her.

"One more time?"

"Not. Going. To happen." Larrin repeated, acting as if the Colonel had asked the world's stupidest question.

"Dare I ask, why not?"

"My home-world doesn't have a gate. After the whole 'Attero Device' situation, we decided that the gates were more trouble than they were worth. We prefer to travel on ships; plus, the Wraith have been using the gate network more and more since you're people have been blowing up all their ships."

"We're good at that." Howell snapped, feeling foolish as soon as he spoke. He was getting far too anxious to win the debates he got into with Larrin.

"And you have my utmost respect for it. But after the catastrophe that lost us our Ancient vessel, we decided gates aren't all they're cracked up to be. We settled on a world \_way\_ out thereâ€¦" She pointed to the far side of the room, as if she knew exactly where it was relative to that planet.

"And have lived happily ever since. We've got a few allies out there that still use the gates, and even a few hidden supply depots, but our home-world is safe and sound off the beaten path. The rest of your cute little plan sounds good though." Larrin said condescendingly. Howell stood up and rolled his shoulders.

"This is your ship. We are guests here. That is the only reason \_this\_, " he gestured around the room, mostly at her, "â€¦ is okay."

He started to walk away, still seething, when Larrin spoke again. The change in her voice was what stopped him; he'd been ready to just ignore her.

"When's the last time you slept?"

"Some of us slept last night." Howell said without turning around.

"But you weren't one of those guys, right?" Larrin asked knowingly. Howell turned around now, a sarcastic smile already forming.

"I look that bad, do I?"

"Not really. But I know if \_my\_ people were stranded and helpless somewhere, I wouldn't sleep until they were safe." It was almost touching, and Howell liked ninety percent of it. He cringed at the 'helpless' part, but didn't want to ruin the moment.

"But you are safe now. I'll make some sub-space calls, ask around at our supply depots for that part we need. In the mean time, get some rest. We've got plenty of bunks now that most of our civilians are planet side. And I imagine they're more comfortable than the ground out there." Larrin said sincerely, nodding out the cockpit window.

"Strangeâ€|" Howell said slowly, rubbing his chin. "Colonel Sheppard said you all slept on little blankets on the floor. Beds do sound nice though." He turned on his heel and walked out, narrowly avoiding the balled up piece of paper thrown at his head!

John Howell actually caught himself laughing as he left the room, the tension of the past few days somehow disappearing. He'd cracked a joke, albeit one in poor taste, and he'd even laughed. When was the last time that had happened? He couldn't remember, but didn't try that hard. He was tired enough that when he finally found an empty bunk on the decks above, he asleep before he hit the pillow.

## 6. Don't Wander Off

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\* \* \*

><p>Major Bret Jones was still icing his shoulder after the massive woman had flipped him over the table. He'd been content to just arm wrestle a few of the other guys onboard; but noâ€| This woman had stopped just short of tying him up like a pretzel and taking a bite out of him!<p>

"Alright there kid? You ain't milking it, are you?" Major Bacon demanded, plopping down across from him.

"Nothing to milk. Just being polite really; the cook went to all that trouble to find some ice so didn't want to offend the guy." Jones lied, placing the plastic-wrapped ice cube on the table in front of him.

"Good. I'd hate to see your kill count start dropping on account of a busted shoulder!" Bacon said with a toothy grin. Jones frowned and shook his head.

"No sirree. If this arm doesn't want to work I'll just use the other. And I'm still winning, you know! I counted at least eight on that last planet." Jones said proudly.

"Twelve." Bacon cooed. Jones almost fell out of his chair, and his got so wide they nearly fell out of his head.

"Twelve! No way! You're making that up!"

"Grenades, son, grenades. I'm all out now but they sure do work. Besides, I saw one of your 'kills' get up and start running again; that's actually more like seven." Bacon grinned, crossed his arms, and raised an eyebrow in a way that reminded Jones of a hill-billy that had just won a lifetime supply of duct tape.

"Well I'll make it up next time." Jones said quickly, reapplying the icepack. He'd risk losing a little face now to make sure he was primed for the next battle.

"So. See any you like." Bacon asked, not looking at Jones and speaking so low Jones barely heard him.

"Pardon?"

"Come on, Jones! These fine ladies aren't military, or at least not U.S. military, so there's no harm in looking. Besides, the Colonel seems pretty friendly with this 'Larrin' gal and I hear Peabody's pouting because Krag went and stole the prettiest little blonde engineer you ever did see. So. See any you like?"

Now Bret Jones liked kidding around, even to the point of offending other officers back on Atlantis. He and Bacon got along so well because of it; they're line of acceptable and not acceptable was far past most others. But even Jones did in fact have a line.

"Colonel Howell is busy making sure we get home, period. Krag is busy fixing the engines so can do just that, and I think Major Bane would skin you alive for that comment, if he wasn't asleep over there in the corner." Jones snapped. Sure enough, the big black man was leaning against the far wall, on his feet, sound asleep and snoring softly. He hadn't slept much lately either.

"Now now, hold your horses! This is pure scuttlebutt! Rumors, and such! The raisin branch, or whateverâ€¦"

"Grapevine."

"That's it! Ain't nothin' official bout it. Just wondering. You'd have to be pretty blind orâ€¦ queerâ€¦ \_not\_ to be looking at that Captain Larrin. She's a mighty fine gal. And you know I'm just messing with Krag! Kid needs to lighten up. And so do you!" Bacon pointed a grimy finger at the other Major accusingly.

"You don't outrank me, boy, battlefield promotion or not! Don't you forget that."

"You won't let me, remember?" Jones said dryly. A year prior on a mission engaging Wraith troops attacking a small settlement, Major Jones' commanding officer was attacked and nearly killed by a Wraith drone. With literally his dying breath, he promoted Jones above another soldier who was actively trying to take command. It was a day that haunted Jones every night since. A total of one Marine and fifteen civilians had died brutally. He'd had to take command from someone older and more experienced than him, and then give full report to Major Lorne afterwards. He didn't have PTSD, he didn't have nightmares or wake up screaming. But every night before he went to sleep he saw those faces, lying on the ground. And he swore he'd kill every Wraith he ever came across.

"To answer your question; no, I haven't seen any I like." Jones responded, a solemn look on his face.

"Yet. You haven't seen any \_yet\_. Well, neither have I. But that one gal in the corner is giving me the heebie-jeebies." Bacon visibly shuddered and nodded to a somewhat older woman sitting in the corner.

She had short graying hair, a very round and plump face to go with the rest of her, and was chewing her granola very slowly while staring at Bacon in a way she must have assumed was seductive. She was not a gorgeous woman. Not particularly ugly, for sure, but considering the other women walking aroundâ€¦

"Oh, be polite, Major! Go say hi!" Jones prodded, perking up again. Bacon didn't move.

"No way."

"Oh, come on! She looks just your type! Hey over there!" Jones stood up, called out to the woman loudly, and motioned her over.

"My friend wants to talk to you!" Jones said with a smile. The woman bounced up out of her seat and came tearing over, lips pursed and eyes sparkling with delight. Jones wisely got out of the way as he watched Bacon mouth the words 'I hate you' over and over again.

"You two lovebirds have fun!" Jones dodged another man walking across the small mess hall and slid around a few chairs to stand over by Bane.

"Where are you going?" Bane demanded, startling Jones considerably.

"What? Oh, uhâ€¦ no where. Just looking for the rest of the guys; I haven't seen the Colonel or Captain Krag lately. Plus Peabody's been off somewhere pouting and I wanted to check on him."

"Don't wander off. If the Colonel is on board, we'll be lifting off soon. He has a way of getting things done." Bane said, still not opening his eyes or lifting up his head.

"Yes sir. I kind of figured that; Captain Larrin doesn't seem like the lazy type either."

"Tell Peabody to man up when you find him." Bane called after him as Jones took another step.

\* \* \*

><p>As it turned out, the Colonel was asleep and sleeping soundly. Jones didn't feel brave enough to wake him, and figured if he felt comfortable enough to sleep, the situation must be under control. Krag was wrapped up in an in depth conversation about artificial gravity with the Chief Engineer. Jones wandered around the ship, tripping on stacks of parts and wires every few yards, until he finally found Peabody sitting in an open air lock.<p>

They were on the highest deck of the deck, and the airlock was letting in a much needed breeze. The air was beyond stale and still

hadn't cooled down much from the engine problem they'd had earlier. It was still dark outside; the stars were shining in as well as some moonlight.

Peabody was sitting with his legs dangling out the airlock, hands folded in his lap. Jones took one look at him and decided on a plan. Very quickly and quietly, he snuck up on the unsuspecting scientist until he was inches away.

"RAH!" Jones grabbed the man's shoulder, screamed in his ear, and then laughed hysterically when the man almost fell out the airlock!

"What theâ€¦! Why the bloodyâ€¦? JONES!" Peabody thrashed around spastically, screaming Bret's name and pounding on the shoulder with his somewhat feeble fists. Jones had been hit harder by the girls at his high school; he was in no danger of being hurt.

"Relax relax! You'll break a nail or rip your nylons!" Jones managed to say, finally able to speak again. He'd set it up perfectly and Peabody's reaction made it perfect.

"You bloody stupid American! I could have fallen out of the bloody ship! And I do not wear \_stockings!\_"

"Where is all of this blood? And why is that cuss word? 'bloody stupid American'; the correct way to insult is 'dang feminine Brit'. \_That\_ gets the point across." Jones corrected, letting Peabody's shoulder go as soon as he was sure the man wasn't in danger of falling out the door. He took a seat across from Peabody and admired the view outside.

"That is some view you've found here. Do the boys and girls upstairs know you've got this thing open?"

"I imagine if we're going to be lifting off it will be fairly obvious. And yes, I found the door open, so I assume that is controlled elsewhere." Peabody admitted sullenly. He sat against the door frame to face Jones easier, evidently still nervous about being shoved out.

"I hear you got into with Krag down in Engineering." Jones said abruptly.

"How on Earth could you have possibly heard that?"

"There were three other engineers in the room that all came down to the mess shortly after. Sufficed to say we got most of the story not long after it happened." Jones explained, shrugging apologetically. Peabody blushed heavily and his mouth started to twitch.

"Iâ€¦ lost my temper."

"First and foremost, DUH!" Jones said as he smacked the Brit upside the head. "And secondly, I'm not the one you need to be telling this to."

"Then why did you bring it up?"

"Because you're here, alone, sulking. Now granted the Colonel is

asleep and I really will throw you out this door if you wake him, but I don't hear any apologies going Krag's way. And just a helpful hint; that wasn't much of an apology." Jones' voice was almost sarcastic, but Peabody could tell he was being serious.

"I do not hand out apologies lightly, certainly not to every Texan that decides to butt into my business!" Peabody said harshly. "But yes, I do believe you are right, this time. Don't let it go to your already enormous head."

Somehow, they both started laughing, even though Peabody insisted that it wasn't funny while he laughing. Finally they both went silent and listened to the persistent insects outside, watching as the moon sank in the sky.

"I also heard you were questioning Krag's rank."

"Did you get a report on my bowel movements while you were at it?" Peabody demanded, looking even more embarrassed than before.

"Yes. Eat more fiber; the janitor complained. But about the rank thingâ€¦" He stopped to laugh at his own joke, but got no more than a smile from the Brit.

"Seriously. Don't do that again. All of us, the Colonel included, are high ranking for our age. All of us have stories; none of them are happy ones. You haven't been with us long enough to hear most of themâ€¦"

"I've heard yours." Peabody cut in. Jones pursed his lips and nodded.

"Oh really."

"Who was this wanker that so severely pissed off both you and your commanding officer?" When Jones realized that 'wanker' was an insult, he was surprised at the man's sympathy. Especially considering he'd been so furious a minute before.

"Well, you've heard of Kavanagh, right?"

"Oh dear Lord. That bad?" Peabody noticeably paled and looked appalled. Jones laughed and continued.

"Turns out the dude has a brother. They hate each other like nobody's business, but there is a family resemblance. Mostly in the attitude department. Plus he's Navy, so he's automatically an a-hole in my opinion."

"Oh yes, I'd forgotten about that silly rivalry. Must you Marines harass your drivers like that? One day it'll get you dropped off in some barren desert and you'll be stuck there." Peabody pointed a finger severely at Jones like a school teacher chiding a student.

"It did, genius! Ever hear of Operation Desert Storm?" Jones demanded, playfully swatting away the finger.

"Oh, I didn't realizeâ€¦ Is that true?!"



"No, but it gets funnier the more you know about it. Best not to mention that to the Colonel, though. A lot of good men died there and he tends not to like jokes about that kind of thing." Jones warned.

"I assumed as much. The Colonel doesn't seem to joke about much."

"No, but have you ever seen him lose an argument?" Jones asked.

"Not until he met Captain Larrin. I can see why Colonel Sheppard was so infatuated with her." Peabody fairly whispered, as if scared the women might jump out of the shadows as he mentioned her name.

"Colonel Sheppard was scared of her."

"Fair enough."

\* \* \*

><p>One deck below, the very woman they were talking about was en route to the bunks. She was walking so quickly and with such an angry look on her face that people were literally jumping out of her way.<p>

Her hair was bouncing and her boots were stomping on the deck, and by the time she reached the Colonel's bunk they were alone in the room.

"Howell! Wake up!" She grabbed a pillow from the bunk above him and threw it on top of his face. He sat bolt upright, almost knocking himself out on the metal rack above him.

"What is it?"

"The Wraith caught up to us. I hope your little Marines can actually fight, because we've got a Wraith \_cruiser\_ coming down on us!"

## 7. Son of the South, Soldier of Earth

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><strong>**\*\*EDITOR'S NOTE:** Finally, the promised action. And the death of a character. Read on and please let me know any opinions you have on what I've done with the story so far.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>"Alright, go over this with me one more time." Howell asked, still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. He was standing in the Traveler ship's bridge, watching as Larrin brought up a sensor

readout on a large screen.<p>

"We've been playing cat and mouse with a Wraith cruiser for the past few days. We set down on this planet trying to shake them and repair our engines at the same time. I thought we had lost them, but a few minutes ago a dart buzzed the atmosphere, scanning away." Larrin said with a sneer.

"I don't suppose you shot them down?" Howell asked, mildly curious.

"It was gone too fast. Even if I had, they would have known we were down here!" Larrin snapped, looking at Howell like he was an idiot.

"Yes, but they wouldn't have known how many ships we had or where exactly we are. What's the situation with the engines?" Howell asked, still staring hard at the approaching Wraith ship.

"Star thinks she can get us into the atmosphere of the nearest world with a gate, but she'll need at least another hour to get it working. The nav computer has been acting up lately and a lot of the calculations take a while to process." Larrin groaned, leaning against a column jutting out of the wall. Howell looked thoughtful and kept firing off questions.

"Shields?"

"Intermittent at best."

"You use energy based weapons, right? How effective are those?"

"Fairly good at close range; but if that cruiser is smart, she won't be anywhere near us."

"So we're aren't going anywhere for at least an hourâ€|" Howell said, mostly to himself. He counted off each point on a finger as he spoke. "And ship to ship combat will get us no where. What are the chances of them deciding we're more trouble than we're worth?" He asked, turning to face Larrin for a second.

"Slim to none. I may have pissed them off a few times." Larrin said with a certain degree of pride. She refused to say more, though.

"This is your ship and your crew; I don't want to step on your toes more than I have to. But do you have any experience with land combat? Because the way I'm seeing it, that's where this is headed." Howell asked, trying hard not to provoke a smart-aleck answer.

"Why do you say that? They might just bomb us out of existence from orbit." Larrin objected, flicking her hair out of her eyes.

"Because you said you pissed them off, and the Wraith tend to hold grudges." Howell rolled around the facts for a second longer before letting loose with his plan.

"Here's what going to happen. We're going to power down every system on this ship except what Star needs for the repairs. We're then going

to channel all that power into the shield generators. The Wraith see us, fire off a few volleys, and realize they won't be able to break through our shields anytime soon." Howell said quickly, his mind racing.

"After that, they launch darts to put troops on the ground. They don't know that the gate is out of commission, yet. Do think this cruiser has the resources and manpower to dial in from another world?"

"Oh yeah. That's probably already done. This ship is part of a larger hive alliance we've been tracking since we settled in this part of the galaxy. They're quite the resourceful littleâ€¦"

"So they're going to be counting on a land battle. If we put our people in the woods, the tree cover will protect us from dart beams, while drawing the Wraith right to us. We make our stand near the ship, wait for Star to get the engines online, and then fly out of here." Howell finished, the picture fully formed in his head.

"Well, there are only a few dozen problems with that. Starting with the fact that we're talking about hundreds of Wraith drones, at least. I've got maybe seventy men on board that would be good in a fight. And what's to stop them from say, bombarding the area around the ship from orbit?" Larrin demanded, standing up straight again.

"Do you have a better plan?" He demanded, starting to lose his temper.

"How about we just wait it out in the ship and not go outside at all?" Larrin challenged.

"Because sooner or later those hundreds of Wraith drones will either beat down those doors sabotage the engines from the outside. We need to keep them away from the ship so Star doesn't have any other problems to worry about." Howell shot back. They both stared at each other for a long while, each trying to think of another comeback.

"Look, I get that this plan isn't perfect. I know your people aren't all that familiar with man-to-man combatâ€¦"

"Excuse me? We didn't seem to have a problem containing Sheppard when we found him!" Larrin half shouted, clearly insulted.

"Yes. But he's Air Force. They fly things." Howell snapped back. "And in the report, he mentioned that a solitary Wraith had 'contained' you when he had to rescue you. And you were armed at the time. Should we go on?" Howell demanded.

"I'm not trying to insult you but this is no time for politeness. My people have been doing this for a long time and we'll be doing it for far longer than I care to think about. We kill Wraith, and we're good at it. I've got four men, plus me. Give me fifty of your best, ten for each team, and leave the rest inside the ship in case of emergency. Star fixes the engines, we kill a few Wraith, and we all fly away happy."

Again, there was a moment of silence as the two thought, but finally

Larrin nodded.

"That ship will be here in minutes. We better get ready to greet them." She walked over to another console and started powering down systems.

"Get your people to the airlocks and I'll have my men join them shortly." Larrin said without looking up. Howell nodded and walked out of the room quickly, already reaching for his radio.

Five minutes later, all five marines were standing in formation around the ship's engines, partially protected by the canopy above. Howell wished it was a little denser, but he hoped it would work. The ship was behind them, the gate was in front of them and already dialed in, while the Wraith were still descending from above.

"Alright, you know the drill! If it moves, shoot it. Do not, I repeat, do not waste ammo on the darts!" Howell shouted. Behind every Marine was a squad of ten Travelers, all armed with their impressive guns. He didn't see any rifles, besides his own anyway, which concerned him. Handguns were only so effective in long term combat.

"Our guns aren't quite big enough to knock those things down, and any shots taken at the darts will be coming from the ship itself. Concentrate only on the Wraith on the ground!"

The guns from the Traveler's ship weren't at the right angle to fend off all of the darts; a lot of Wraith would still be getting through. Howell looked to each man and woman in turn, wondering morbidly how many would still be alive by nightfall. The sun had already risen and was slowly climbing in the sky, giving the forest an eerie orange glow not unlike the Traveler's engines had done.

Major Bane was standing in front of his men, assault rifle cocked and ready, a grim look of determination on his face. They'd all fought Wraith before, but standing around waiting for them to come? That was new for the Marines. But if Bane was nervous, he sure didn't show it.

Major Jones and Bacon were whispering insults at each other, each boasting that they'd kill more Wraith than the other. The playful remarks soon had the Travelers joining in, lightening the mood however slightly.

Captain Krag was looking incredibly thoughtful. His head was down, eyes closed, as if praying. Somehow he realized Howell was staring at him, and raised his head slowly. Almost in slow motion, he pulled the hammer back on his rifle, raised it to his shoulder, and shoutedâ€|

"They're here!"

Chaos ensued. A dozen Wraith darts flying in formation flew downward at insane angles, dodging the bright red bolts coming from the Traveler's cannons. Five darts in particular were flying in the lead, heading straight for the men on the ground.

The lead dart flew straight on as if swinging on a wire while the

dart immediately beside it was blown to pieces by a lucky shot from the ship. All at once, the remaining four darts engaged their transport beams, and the earsplitting sound of the machinery blasted them.

"Get ready! Jones, Bacon, you're up first!" Howell shouted, trying to be heard over the whine of engines over head. None of the darts had fired yet, which Howell noted in the back of his mind, but they did manage to beam down four squads of five Wraith each. Howell could hear his heartbeat and feel the sweat form on his brow. Silence seemed to descend on the small formation of troops.

Then it all ripped open at once. Major Jones' men fired first, rounds of conventional bullets and the red energy beams of Travler guns racing towards the Wraith as they fired back. Stun bolts of white hot energy ripped towards them, and they all dove for cover around the rocks and makeshift barricades they'd constructed.

"Hold the line! Keep them back from the ship!" Howell ordered, not sure if anyone heard him. He balanced his own rifle on the pile of scrap metal in front of him, picking a target fresh off a dart. He pulled the trigger once, twice, and then three times, trying to conserve his ammunition. Two of the Wraith dropped, but the third snarled in rage and kept coming, the bullet on grazing his shoulder.

"You suck at shooting!" All of a sudden, a familiar voice yelled in his ear and the sound of a Travler gun erupted behind him. The Wraith dropped to the grass with a new blister instead of a face.

"Larrin? What are you doing out here?" Howell demanded, still firing at the oncoming waves. She gave a mischievous smile and shook her head, the wind from the darts blowing her hair back.

"You really think I'd stay in the ship and let you have all the fun? Get down!" She shoved Howell over as a stunner bolt hit the grass where his head had been, and he nodded a quick thank you.

"If you call this 'fun' I'd hate to see one of your bad days!" Howell shouted, climbing back up as another squad of Wraith beamed down.

The clearing around the ship was soon full of Wraith, both living and dead. They'd flooded into the woods, trying to catch the humans in a crossfire, but that only served to stretch them out further.

Major Jones' team, the first line of defense, suffered three casualties as the fighting was getting started. They were just stunned and dragged back to the ship quickly, but they were still out of the fight. Jones himself refused to stay under cover, standing on top of the barricade his men had built, screaming at the top of his lungs and firing away.

Bane and Bacon had rushed in to cover the holes in his line, only to start losing people themselves. Men and women both fell to the grass, some only partially paralyzed, others knocked out cold.

Krag was the farthest back from the lines with the best shots of the Traveler ship around him. Firing only when he was sure of a kill, he and his men slowly wore down the oncoming Wraith a little at a

time.

Howell was in the middle, trying to fill in the gaps and cover the non-combatants as they dragged the injured inside.

"How many Wraith could they possibly have?" Howell demanded, popping another clip into his rifle. Another Traveler went down almost on top of him, which he narrowly avoided.

"I came out because our sensors showed a hive ship coming into orbit! There's a lot more where these came from!" Larrin shouted, still firing as she spoke.

Howell barely heard her; he saw with horror that one of the Travelers too far from the lines had been stunned, dragged away, and had a Wraith standing over him! Howell fired one round that went through the Wraith's hand, another through the elbow, and a third through the head. The commander Wraith plopped down to the grass, and two more men came running to drag away the fallen soldier.

Everywhere Howell could see, Wraith were being blasted either with the red bolts of Traveler guns or the staccato of Earth bullets, but still more came! Soon, the ground was littered with the bodies, and the firing rate slowed down.

Major Bane's team had somehow all run out of ammo simultaneously, and Bane alone was trying to cover the left flank while his men reloaded! Two drones hopped over the barricade, knocking the rifle out of Bane's hand and tackling another man.

"Krag, help Bane!" Howell shouted as he and Larrin turned their attention to the line of Wraith heading towards them. Krag's rifle picked up it's pace, and four enemies were downed in as many seconds. Bane grabbed his gun, the other Traveler's finished reloading, and they all leapt back into the fight.

"We're running out of ammo!" Howell yelled, counting down as the last of his bullets were loaded into the chamber. In his head he assigned a number to each of the Wraith he shot. \_Nine, eight, sevenâ€¦four, three, two one zeroâ€¦|\_

With a start he realized he was out, but there were no more Wraith coming! All of the men and women on the battlefield stopped and stared as the field cleared of anything moving. The darts stopped swooping overhead, and near silence descended on them. A few groaned in pain from injuries, others took the opportunity to load new clips or cartridges.

"Well that was easyâ€¦|" Larrin practically whispered, looking around at the enormous amount of bodies now covering the grass. Four more men were taken into the ship, and Howell took a quick head count.

Major Jones' team was gone. He alone stood with Bacon's as the two men piled up bodies to form a morbid sort of wall around the line. Bane had lost five; Bacon two, and Howell only four. Krag's team was unscathed as they were too far back to hit. As he watched though, Krag morosely pointed to his rifle and shook his head.

"No more ammo." Howell guessed, watching as Krag and his men marched

forward. He pulled out his sidearm and had his people fill in the gaps at the front line, all looking tense as they waited. Howell was about to give the order to fall back into the ship when he saw it.

A whole new line of darts, at least twenty or more, was flying in a line and coming straight for them. They opened up with own cannons, the shots ripping into the Traveler's shields and blinding the men operating the cannons onboard. All at once, they activated their beams, and another hundred Wraith appeared \_feet \_away from the line!

"You had to say it, didn't you?" Howell demanded, dropping his rifle. Larrin looked almost apologetic. He grabbed at his sidearm, ordered his men forward, and all of the remaining humans clashed with the Wraith \_hand to hand!\_

All Marines know how to fight. Not just shoot, but fight. Granted, most weren't trained to fight aliens that sucked the life out of you with their hands, but the basic principle was the same. And as the even the Travelers guns ran dry and the Earth pistols clicked on empty, the Marines all remembered their training.

Bane whipped out his knife, threw it into the throat of an oncoming drone, and leapt forward to grab it. He jerked it free of the green flesh, spun around, and jammed it deep into another's chest! Another drone slammed him to the ground with a crushing blow, but he rolled onto his feet a second later, elbowed another oncoming drone in the mask, and reached around to snap a third's neck.

Bacon had somehow found a Wraith knife in the fray besides his own, and slashed into the oncoming wave with blades flashing. Faster than the eye could follow, a neck was opened, a hand was severed, and a ribcage was neatly eviscerated.

Jones and Krag fought back to back, hacking and slashing the enemies to pieces as they advanced, looking for all the world like a pair of action heroes on a movie set.

The Travelers weren't doing nearly as well; they had knives, but apparently didn't know how to use them. Howell watched as more and more of them went down, some permanently now that stunners weren't in the picture.

In the middle of it all, Larrin and Howell stopped over a fallen woman with a Wraith blade in his chest. Howell checked desperately for a heart beat or a solitary breath. With a sigh, he closed the woman's eyes and shook his head. Looking up at Larrin, the world suddenly seemed to stop. The sun was shining, the breeze was blowing, and blood filled the air with every slash and cut. Her hair was blown back, her face covered in blood and grime, and a savage look came over normally blissful face.

"Sheppard was right." Howell whispered. "You are beautiful."

All at once he snapped. Jerking his own knife free, he dove \_over\_ the barricade and drove his blade downward with every fiber of his being! The drone's vest was torn off, his ribcage was split open, and a stunner still in it's holster fell to the grass. In one lightning fast movement, Howell slammed his palm down on the center of the clear plastic front, scooped up the stunner, and turned back to the

line.

As he turned, he threw the vest over the heads of the Wraith and humans alike, it's lights already flashing dangerously. With the other hand, still not stopping to adjust, he held down the trigger of the stunner as he screamed in pure rage.

Bolt after bolt of white light tore into the Wraith line, hitting faces, arms, shoulders And as the Wraith froze and fell, the self-destruct embedded in the vest detonated behind them. Those in the front were stunned or stabbed, those in the back were blown to pieces, the blast setting off others like it in a chain of explosions. A wave of fire and air swept all of them to the ground, and the battle abruptly ended.

Hundreds, if not thousands of dead Wraith were in front of them, while injured men and shell casings were behind them. In the heat of the moment, Howell hadn't heard the desperate call over the radio until right then.

"Colonel? Colonel! The engines are ready to go! Get back onboard this instant!" Howell had never been so glad to hear Peabody's voice, and wasted no time in sounding the retreat.

"Everyone fall back to the ship! Gather the wounded and fall back!" He shouted, his so hoarse it was barely recognizable. He was covered in blood and dirt, still holding the stunner, and looking angry enough to take on a dozen more by himself. He turned to look at Larrin, who was standing a foot behind him looked shocked out of her mind.

"I guess you boys really can fight!" She stuttered, fumbling to sheathe her knife. Howell nodded, but his attention was fixed elsewhere. Bacon was screaming. Not yelling, not shouting, but screaming.

"Jones! Jones! Wake up you stupid son of a!" Tears were streaming down the man's face. Major Bret Jones was lying on his back in the grass drenched in blood. Not all of it was Wraith.

Howell rushed to his side, sliding on his knees in the grass as he came to a stop. Larrin was right behind him, while Bane and Krag ran up with looks of horror on their faces.

"Jones! Jones!" Bacon wouldn't stop screaming, as if the sound of his voice would wake the soldier. Jones' face was already turning white. His hair was matted with blood, and a Wraith blade was stuck deep in his neck, just above the collarbone. As if he'd just seen it, Bacon ripped the offending knife out of him and stabbed it into a Wraith's forehead so hard it went in to the hilt.

"Jones! Jones!" The call was more strained now, like Bacon was slowly realizing the truth. Bane put a hand on his shoulder, but Bacon through it off.

"Oakie! He's gone." Howell said softly, pulling Bacon away. He rose to his feet like he was sleepwalking, still staring at the boyish face on the ground. Howell forced Bacon to look at him, and put his hands on both of Bacon's shoulders.



"Hey, look at me! He's gone. And we will be if we don't go. What would Jones say? What would he want us to do?" Howell demanded, his voice hard and forceful.

"He'dâ€¦ want usâ€¦ to keep goingâ€¦" Bacon stuttered, a sob choking it's way loose.

"Then let's keep going." Bacon walked away from him with the rest of the group, and slowly the dead were loaded into the ship as well. Howell watched them go, still fearful the next wave would hit them unprepared. They Travelers moved fast, and soon only Wraith and blood were left on the grass.

Howell and Larrin ran to the bridge, the horror of the battle still fresh in their minds. As they leapt through the door to the bridge, a man in the pilot's chair nodded to Larrin and tapped a command.

"Go!" Larrin ordered needlessly, bracing herself on the only other chair in the room as the ship lurched.

Far above them, at an angle no one could have seen, a green cloud of lightning ripped open the landscape below the Traveler vessel, and the weary ship literally fell through it as another barrage of Wraith cannon fire descended on top of them.

Finally, it all ended. The hive and its cruiser jumped to hyper-space in pursuit, the wind died down now that darts were no longer riling it up, and silence fell upon the face of the woods.

## 8. We Few Who Remain

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\* \* \*

><p>"Well, we made it. Barely." Larrin reported, staring at the sensor sweep again. The Wraith ships were in hot pursuit, but so far the Travelers were ahead of them. Howell was behind her, leaning against the wall with an expressionless face.<p>

When he didn't respond, Larrin turned to give him a curious look. The Marine didn't look sad or angry, not even determined. He just looked thoughtful. Like he'd seen a magic trick and was trying to figure out how it worked. The rabbit was in the hat, but it shouldn't be. The Marine was in the morgue, but he shouldn't be. It was rare that Larrin felt the urge to sympathize with anyone, but there were a few times that her humanity kicked in.

"I'm sorry about the loss of your man. I lost a few myselfâ€¦" Larrin started to say, the words feeling awkward in her throat.

"Marines don't die." Howell said quietly. His words didn't sound slurred or broken, more like an old recording he was playing for her. "They go to hell and regroup."

Larrin didn't know how to respond to that and didn't try. She just stared, feeling foolish for saying anything, and watched as the man drifted out of the bridge. As the door clanked shut and the guard sealed it, she let out the pent up frustration that had been growing since they'd left the planet.

She didn't yell or scream; the walls were too thin for that. Instead she paced back and forth across the small room, not able to stand still. She pressed her palms against her temples, as if trying to drown out the voices raging inside her mind. Occasionally she punched the padded walls with enough force to dent in the insulation.

She'd lost twenty people. Two squads of her Travelers went down, either hacked to pieces by the Wraith blades or somehow fed upon in the chaos. They'd recovered all of the bodies somehow; no one was missing. But many were dead, and a few more injured. That was the merciful thing about fighting Wraith; the casualties were rarely in pain long. Either stunned, fed upon and killed quickly, or even butchered by drones— Few suffered for long.

Only one Marine had gone down, and from what Larrin had heard, he died saving three others with his last breath. Twenty-one humans had died in all, as well as hundreds of Wraith. Of course, the Wraith could always grow or clone more. People were harder to replace.

Larrin called in someone else to watch the bridge and took off down a corridor. She needed air, but they were in hyperspace. She'd have to settle for a change of scenery.

The mess hall was pretty full; but not everyone was eating. Most were just sitting around, talking quietly about those they'd lost. Some of the stunned Travelers were waking up now and again, only to find out that they'd lost friends hours ago.

As Larrin came into the mess hall, a few men recognized her and moved out of her way out of respect. She nodded and gave out weak smiles when she could. Across the room she could see a lone Marine sitting at a table, and for a second she thought it was Howell. As she got closer, she was disappointed to see it was one of the others.

"You're name's Bacon, right? I think I got a quick introduction to you guys when you came aboard." Larrin said, rambling on somewhat. The man she was speaking to didn't even turn around.

"Please tell me you have alcohol." His voice was dry and cracked while his eyes still looked watery. The old, leathery face seemed to have a few more wrinkles, and he was tightly grasping an empty cup.

"Sorry. It's not terribly useful and we need to be sober to keep these ships flying." Larrin said weakly. The excuse sounded even worse now than when she'd pitched it to her people's high council.

"Figures." The man raised the cup to his mouth, remembered it was empty, and slid it down the metal table to the dishwasher making his rounds. The lights flickering overhead and the rusty metal walls around them seemed to match the weathered man sitting beside Larrin perfectly. Both the ship and her crew were old, but still tough as nails. Or at least she'd thought so.

"I'm sorry about the loss of your man. You too must have been close." Larrin tried, biting her lip when she saw the look on Bacon's face.

"He was like a son to me. He was always moving around; never stayed in one place too long." He looked down at his hands, folded on top of the table, and seemed to be reading something that wasn't there.

"He was born in Texas. His daddy took off before he was born, his momma went to prison for life when he was ten. His grandpa raised him for eight years until he died of lung cancer." He recited. Larrin was surprised; from what she's heard and what they all assumed Earth looked like, a story like that seemed out of place.

"He went into the Marines the day after he flunked out of school. He almost died in Iraq when an IED took out his vehicle and stranded him in enemy territory for a week. After he fought his way out, he was scooped up and sent off to the SG-C for being a hero." Bacon hurriedly wiped away a tear from his face, looking ashamed that he needed to, and kept going. Larrin had little to no clue what the man was referencing, but didn't want to interrupt now.

"So he was put on an SG team and went into combat. Did so well they wanted him for the Atlantis expedition. Two weeks into that a tribe of hostile natives took out his commander and cut him off from the gate. The next in line for command wanted to just wipe out the suckers and call it a day. Jones was promoted with the Colonel's dying breath, and he led his team back through the gate with no civilian casualties. While dragging a kicking and screaming piece of crap called 'Kavanagh', I might add." Bacon swallowed hard and sniffed loudly, but looked determined to finish Jones' story.

"Somehow the promotion stuck and Major Jones was put onto Howell's team. Said it would be a nice breather for a change; no more combat ops, just some nice, easy exploration." Bacon's voice cracked, and another tear needed to be wiped away.

There was a moment of awkward silence before Larrin gathered her thoughts enough to speak. "I'm sorry. I'm not going to pretend I know how you feel; I don't think even you know that right now. But I know that there's only so many ways for a warrior to die." Larrin told the man gently, meeting his harsh gaze. "And any warrior worth fighting beside wouldn't want it any other way."

Bacon sniffed again, nodded quickly, and looked ready to walk away without another word. Larrin could tell that try as she might, the man didn't want to be comforted.

"He died with courage and lived with honor. No better way to go, in my book." With that, Bacon really did walk away, though where he was going Larrin didn't know. She sat there feeling even worse, wondering what if anything she should say. So far both Marines she'd tried to

talk to were now wandering her ship looking even worse than before she'd spoken.

She was about to head back to the bridge, or maybe get a report from engineering when another man sat down across from her and stared her in the eye.

"It's not your fault." The dark skinned man said in a level tone. Larrin raised an eyebrow, not sure what he meant.

"I never said it was."

"The look on your face says otherwise." Larrin remembered as he was speaking to her that the man's name was Bane, but she knew nothing else about him.

"My people have fought the Wraith longer than anyone besides the Ancients. We know what it's like to lose people; this isn't a new experience for any of us." Larrin said almost proudly, gesturing around at her fellow Travelers. Sure enough, most of them weren't broken or weeping; they were just thoughtful as they considered those they'd lost.

"Loss isn't something you grow accustomed to. It's what makes us humans, and not monsters." He said philosophically. But then he assumed a much less formal tone. "I assumed Colonel Howell would be here; he doesn't leave your side often." Bane noted curiously, glancing around at the room full of Travelers. He was the only non-Traveler present.

"Oh really? Is that what people are saying?" Larrin asked, suddenly on the defensive.

"People aren't saying much. Not to me, anyway. I was just observing the facts. Leaders often lead together; few people understand their burdens better." The way Bane managed to say it actually made sense to Larrin, but he still gave her the creeps as he stared emotionlessly at her. Most men were either scared of her or attracted to her; this man was just indifferent.

"Howell isn't in a talkative mood." Larrin explained shortly, still trying to decipher the man's intentions.

"He will be. Eventually. He takes the loss of any of his men hard. If you would like to know a secret—" Larrin was starting to walk away, but the last word Bane said made her stop. "—the best way to make Colonel Howell forget the last battle is to remind him of the next one. You did not hear this from me and if you say you did I will deny it." Bane said firmly. Larrin didn't doubt it.

"Thanks, I think." This time she did manage to escape the mess hall, heading for engineering even more confused than before. She hadn't been fond of the Marines when they'd first held her at gunpoint, but somehow they'd grown on her. Howell reminded her of Sheppard; but only a little. Sheppard had a good sense of humor and could easily be manipulated. Howell seemed more the type to die rather than give in to anyone's demands. She was just glad the big Marine was on her side; the dozens of Wraith he'd slaughtered early could attest to the fact that he wasn't someone you wanted to tick off.

As she reached the tight engineering spaces, she caught a glimpse of Star running back and forth between the control interface on one side of the room and a radiation monitor on the other, looking more concerned than usual.

"Star? What's going on in here?" Larrin asked hesitantly, poking her head in the door.

"Oh, Captain Larrin, I didn't see you there!" Star exclaimed, almost tripping over a conduit. Captain Krag and Peabody were there too, working furiously on a junction box in the back of the room.

"What's going on in here?" Larrin repeated, becoming more and more concerned at all the warning sirens going off.

"Oh, well, see, the hyper-drive isn't really designed to work independent of the sub-lights, crazy as that sounds, so we're have to tweak it just a little." Star explained, mashing on a keyboard as she spoke. A line of sweat appeared on her forehead as another siren started to go off.

"Are we in danger of dropping out of hyper-space? We do have a very angry cruiser chasing us still!" Larrin reminded her, looking over the engineer's shoulder as Krag suddenly leapt up into the air and reattached a hose that was spewing clouds of gas. He managed to clamp it back on after only a little of whatever it was spewed out onto the deck.

"Constantly. But I don't think it will happen. Yet." Star said, her tone far more sure than her actual wording.

"Do what you can with it; I'll figure out where and when we can make real repairs soon." Larrin promised, though she had no idea when or where that would actually be.

"Please let it be sooner rather than later." Star begged, still mashing on the keyboard.

"It's in the red now!" Peabody yelled, his voice very high-pitched. Star raced away, and Larrin wisely shut the door.

The guard at the door looked beyond concerned, and all Larrin could do was shrug and pat him on the back as she passed. She doubted the whole engine would explode without some warning, but you never really knew for sure.

As she walked back to the bridge, she continued to mull over the events of the past few days. The Wraith had risked not one but two ships merely to chase after her. They'd wasted literally hundreds of their troops engaging her on land, and the last attempt had been a bloodbath. Why send your troops in so close when they knew that Travelers fought best at short range? It wasn't making sense to her in the slightest, and the constant pursuit was starting to worry her. If she couldn't hide, and she couldn't run much longer, what other options did she have?

As if to remind her, she literally bumped into Colonel Howell as she entered the bridge. Of course, they could always fight. That was the option that she rarely used when dealing with the Wraith, and for good reason.

Howell had left his rifle and handgun in their armory, now useless since they were out of ammo, and borrowed a Traveler gun. He hadn't shaved in three days now and their showers could only wash off so many layers of dirt and blood. His uniform was ripped and stained with blood so he'd also borrowed a leather Traveler style jacket from somewhere. Colonel Howell was starting to look downright savage, and somehow, it didn't look odd or out of place. If anything his appearance now seemed to reflect the look in his eyes when she'd first met him.

"I'm glad you're here. I found something interesting." Howell said with a half smile. Taken totally off guard, Larrin stepped out of the way as he brought up another sensor feed on the huge monitor.

"Good news? That would be a nice changeâ€| " Larrin guessed, watching as Howell's grin grew even wider.

"See those three blips out there?" Howell asked, pointing on the screen to a formation of ships.

"More Wraith? How is this good?" Larrin demanded, her gut sinking as her mind raced with the possibilities. Had the Wraith brought in more ships to intercept them?

"Not even close. You're looking at the Daedalus, the Apollo, and the Sun Tzu. Earth ships." Howell explained, folding his arms and stepping back to admire the view. "Each one capable of taking out a \_fleet\_ of Wraith hive ships."

It suddenly clicked with Larrin what he was implying, and her own savage looking grin appeared too. The Wraith were still closing on them, but the three ships were no more than five minutes away at the speed they were flying. They might actually have a shot at winning now!

"Have you hailed them?" Larrin demanded, turning back to Howell.

"No." He said simply, still staring at the screen.

"Why not? We need to know if they're in any shape to help usâ€| " Larrin was already firing up the communications system as she spoke, giving Howell a disapproving look.

"I don't know how. I've never been on a Traveler ship before today, remember?"

Larrin barely heard him as she tapped the last command, and a radio signal started playing over the bridge's speakers.

"We have engaged the hive, unfortunately without much success. The Sun Tzu is crippled, and she's venting atmosphere. We're in the process of taking on her crew now, but unfortunately, with my engines down I won't be able to get to the nearest Stargate for a month. As for the enemy, all indications are that they received very little damage and are continuing on their previous course. " Larrin turned it off as she realized it was a recording, and Howell's face fell.

"What hive ship could take on three Daedalus class ships and win?" Larrin demanded.

Howell's smile was gone, and his face fell as he spoke. "I don't know. But I think we're going to find out."

## 9. The Wraith are Here

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><p>"The Wraith are still closing on us; they'll be able to see those ships in another minute. So are we going to run to your people for help or try to draw the Wraith away?" Larrin demanded, climbing into the pilot's chair. Howell still looked like he'd been punched in the gut after hearing the Apollo's distress call.<p>

"Would the Wraith have already heard the message we just did?" Howell asked, ripping his gaze away from the sensor display.

"Not necessarily, we didn't get it until we hailed them." Larrin pointed out.

"Like an answering machine." He said, mostly to himself. Larrin stared at him for a second longer before snapping at him again.

"Howell! What do you want to do? We have forty five seconds until those Wraith can see your puny little ships!"

"Move to intercept the Earth vessels." Howell ordered, shaking his head as he spoke. The feeling in his gut told him that it was a mistake, but he clung to the idea that even a damaged Apollo or Daedalus could take a Hive ship.

"Alright, here we go." Larrin entered in the course corrections and the ship veered off, even though none of the crew felt it. The inertial dampeners still worked fine, even if most of the other systems were having trouble.

"Try hailing them again; there's got to be someone in that fleet still able to answer." Howell suggested. Larrin punched in another command and nodded to him.

"This is Colonel John Howell of the Atlantis expedition to any surviving members of the Apollo or Daedalus. Please respond."

Larrin gave him a strange look as he spoke, almost like she'd suddenly noticed his presence. "I didn't know your name was John."

Howell rolled his eyes and nodded, counting off the seconds until someone replied.

"Colonel Howell? Is this some kind of a joke?" The harsh and unforgettable voice of Captain Ellis came over the radio, and a second later Larrin was able to put a video feed on another monitor. The two of them turned to face the Captain, who had obviously seen better days.

In the background, Larrin and Howell could see shattered glass, broken conduits and sparking wires, as well crewmen frantically running to repair critical systems. Ellis himself was cut, bruised, looking exhausted and in desperate need of a shave.

"Colonel Ellis, I assure you, this is no joke. I'd love to make the formal introductions but we have a slight Wraith problem at the moment." Howell explained quickly. Ellis' face fell noticeably at the word 'Wraith'.

"Tell me about it. Our sensors are down; what exactly do you mean by 'Wraith problem'?" Ellis asked, running a hand over his head as he spoke.

"One hive and one cruiser, both pissed off and looking for a fight." Larrin said from behind Howell, still sprawled out in the pilot's chair. Howell was standing at attention and looking respectful while Larrin looked more like a ruler accepting peasants into her throne room. Considering the way Howell was dressed and the condition of the normally pristine Apollo, the situation couldn't have been much weirder.

"A hive and cruiser? And you expect us to sort all of that out?" Ellis demanded, folding his arms stiffly in front of him. The video feed started to cut out, and suddenly Colonel Caldwell appeared instead. The bridge of the Daedalus looked a little better, but was still obviously damaged and in the process of being repaired.

"This is Caldwell, I heard all of that loud and clear. Look, believe me I'd like to help, but I'm not sure there's much we can do." Caldwell said far more politely than his counterpart. "Our ships were heavily damaged in the fight with the super hive. The Sun Tzu is completely abandoned and being towed by the Apollo, which is taxing her sub-lights to the extreme. Our beam weapons are down, our shields are barely functional, and we \_just\_ managed to get both of our hyper-drives online again! Your own ship might be in better shape than any we've got here." Caldwell said with a sigh. It was plainly obvious that the Colonel was at the end of his rope already, and the problem of more Wraith was not what he wanted to hear.

Howell hated to get into arguments with his superiors, or even his fellow soldiers. But he had to make his point clear too. "Colonel Caldwell, without getting into unnecessary details, my team and I have been stranded on an uninhabited planet for days. We then witnessed a Traveler ship crash and almost burn not a half mile from the gate, and we recently lost over twenty men in a hand to hand battle with Wraith forces. We are now being pursued by said Wraith and our engines are in terrible shape. Our sub-lights are gone and I have the sinking feeling that if and when we stop to meet up with you, we will not be able to reengage our hyper-drive." Howell said as quickly as he could. The Wraith were still bearing down on them, and



had to have seen the Earth ships by now.

"With all due respect, sir, we've had a rough time too. But we still need help and we need it now." Howell finished. Caldwell looked torn, and the video feed changed back to Ellis.

"I'm sorry for your loss, but to be honest I have no clue who you are and I barely care. Atlantis is no longer in this galaxy and we are trying to evacuate ourselves; our ships are crippled, and you have led Wraith straight to us! I'm not convinced this isn't some kind of sick joke you're playing on us! You don't even resemble Expedition personnel!" Ellis argued, looking Howell up and down on his own screen as he spoke. Howell's jaw clenched and he bit back his first choice of words. As he was about to try again, Larrin cut in for him.

"Oh please. Your piss-poor ship got beaten up and now you're scared of a few Wraith? And does this man look like the joking kind?" Larrin demanded in an almost uncharacteristic outburst. She rose from her seat to get closer to the camera before going on.

"If you're too scared to help your own people, we'll deal with this ourselves." Larrin's voice sounded one hundred percent sincere. If she was bluffing, neither Howell nor Ellis could tell. Thankfully, Caldwell came back on and tried to mediate.

"Look, our ships are in bad shape and so are yours. But even still, there's strength in numbers. Drop out of hyper-space and form up with our own ships and we'll see what we can do. Caldwell out." The video feed died completely, even though Ellis was already trying to object again. Howell had a feeling that the Apollo's communications were down and he was hijacking the Daedalus' signal, which would explain the almost comical conversation.

"I take it you two weren't friends back on Atlantis?" Larrin asked, referring to Ellis as soon as the feed died.

"I knew of him, but no, he wasn't popular even with my superiors." Howell admitted, still seething from the short conversation.

"Caldwell seemed a little more reasonable. You think we can count on them for help or should we keep going? We might still outrun the hive." Larrin suggested, her tone deadly serious.

Howell shook his head and went against his gut, again. "No, we need to stop. Even if they can't help us, we might be able to help them. Three ships are better than one, and even without the beam weapons our ships are still formidable."

"I sure hope so." Larrin hopped back into the pilot's chair and pulled back on a lever, and the ship dropped out of hyperspace. "I'm using the maneuvering thrusters to angle us into positionâ€" Larrin stopped short as a visual of the three ships came onto the monitor.

Ellis hadn't been lying. They really were in bad shape! The Sun Tzu was attached to the Apollo by several long tow lines, which were now being cut for some reason, with huge sections of the hull twisted and warped from Wraith cannon fire. The Apollo wasn't much better; hull

plating was missing from a dozen sections of the ship while all of the antennas and other hardware usually jutting up from the top of the vessel were just scraped off, as if the ship they'd fought had tried to run them over.

The Daedalus was in the best shape, but still obviously damaged. It looked like she'd been in a different fight altogether; she wasn't nearly as bad off as her sister ships.

"What was that Caldwell had said? A \_super\_ hive did all of this? I wonder where that thing got off toâ€|" Larrin wondered morbidly as she positioned the Traveler ship above the Daedalus and Apollo. The Sun Tzu was behind all three of them and hopefully somewhat sheltered; another few hits would have annihilated her altogether.

"Hopefully far from here. If Atlantis lifted off and left the galaxy, I think we can assume both it and the super hive were headed for Milky Way, my galaxy. But if that hive took out three battle cruisersâ€|" Howell shook his head in wonder as he tried to comprehend it all. "â€|I don't know what they expect Atlantis to do."

"We don't have time to worry about that; the Wraith are here!" Larrin shouted. Another Traveler crewmember who must have been listening at the door ran in and filled the other chair directly in front of Larrin while Howell remained where he was. He felt somewhat useless, but after the battle on the planet's surface he was ready to leave this one to the professionals. Caldwell, Ellis and Larrin had been fighting this kind of war for longer than Howell had known it existed.

"The Wraith ships have dropped out of hyper-space! They're firing!"

\* \* \*

><p>Space is a vacuum. There's no air, at least most of the time, so there's nothing to transmit sound. The only thing the ship crews would hear would be the moaning of their ship's hull against impacts or the thundering of cannons if they were near those. From the outside, however, it was deadly silent.<p>

The four ships all sat in formation, with three forming a sort of triangle. The two Wraith ships had jumped in beside each other, with the cruiser quickly performing evasive maneuvers, and the battle began.

With beam weapons down, the Apollo and Daedalus were reduced to missiles and rail guns, which immediately opened fire. Bright lines of yellow lights erupted from the Earth ship's cannons, while smoke trails announced the arrival of missiles into the fray. The Traveler ship's own cannons were a little slower than the rail guns, but packed more of a punch per shell. All of their shields were damaged, but holding for the moment as the Wraith started \_their \_barrage.

Whatever generated the white blasts of energy from inside the wraith ships seemed to work well; bolt after bolt of the huge balls of energy was hurled from the gigantic hive ship while the cruiser

launched into its own volley from underneath the ship. They hadn't launched darts yet, as the field of fire would have merely shredded the little ships.

At first, the shields of the three human vessels held up. But so did the hulls of the Wraith ships. The Wraith were fresh out of whatever docking system they used, while the human vessels couldn't have been in worse shape. Little by little, the Wraith fire weakened and then broke the Apollo's shields.

"The Apollo's shields are down!" The unknown crewman in front of Larrin yelled. The warning sirens and sounds of groaning metal made it almost impossible to think, let alone speak inside the small bridge.

"I'm moving us in to intercept the next wave!" Larrin shouted back, leaning in to drive a control stick nearly to the floor. Howell watched in horror as the Wraith cruiser fired again, and the next blast hit their shields just outside the bridge.

"We can't take much more either! Shields are down to twenty percent and falling!" The man at the other console informed them, sweat pouring off of him as he lined up another shot.

"The cruiser's almost finished, but that hive is still going strong! What do you want to do, Howell?" Larrin demanded, clawing aside her hair to get a better look at him. Fire extinguishers went off automatically to put out a fire that had broken out behind them, while the warning sirens continued their desperate plea. Larrin looked even more determined than she had on the planet; it was like she felt every wound her ship took.

"Patch me in to the Daedalus!" Howell told her, knowing what he'd have to do. He didn't wait for the man's face to appear on the screen, he just made the call he knew would kill him.

"Colonel Caldwell, have your ships jump to hyper-space now! Get them out of here anyway you can! We'll hold off the Wraith as long as possible, now go!" Howell ordered. He had no clue if his order got through until he saw the Apollo and Daedalus disengage from the battle and make the jump to hyper-space. Larrin looked totally appalled.

"Great work, now what do we do?" Larrin's voice took on an almost desperate pitch, and Howell had to talk quickly to explain his plan.

"Our sub-lights are down and so is the hyper-drive by now, but we still have maneuvering thrusters!" Howell shouted. Larrin gave him a look that read, 'Are you kidding me?'

"So instead of running away from the Wraith, how about we run to them? Finish off that cruiser and drift us into the hollow center of the hive! They can't fire at us from that angle!"

Larrin's eyes seemed to light up with their own fire as she understood what he was saying, and literally kicked the ship into high gear with a foot pedal.

"We just lost inertial dampeners and shields are down! The cruiser

just exploded and the shockwave is approaching rapidly!" The other crewman yelled desperately.

"Then hold on, because we're going in!"

## 10. A Traveler in Wraith's Clothing

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\* \* \*

**><p>**Desperation will do things to the human mind. Sometimes the brain just shuts down and waits for the inevitable, sometimes new and fantastic ideas are dreamt up in a last ditch effort to save itself. Colonel Howell's plan definitely fit into that category.**<p>**

With shields failing, systems going critical, and the image of the fleeing battle cruisers still fresh in its crew's mind, the Traveler ship flew towards the Wraith hive ship. Its cannons ceased to fire, diverting power instead to other critical systems and the Wraith were so surprised they didn't have time to react. Or maybe they knew exactly what the humans were planning and didn't care to stop them.

Thrusters fired at dangerously high levels, the ship groaned and creaked from the strain of the maneuver, and ever so slowly the Traveler ship flew up, turned sideways, and then fell down into the cavity in the center of the hive ship! The Wraith stopped firing as well; they had no cannons pointed at such a crazy angle because no one had ever tried such a thing in combat.

The hulls scraped, the thick organic skin of the hive was rubbed away, and the Traveler ship came to a stop in the cavity. They'd dropped shields to fit more snugly inside, and the bridge, secluded near the top of the ship, was wedged firmly into the mess of hull fragments and conduits.

"It workedâ€|" Larrin said slowly, her eyes wide as she stared at the display.

"You sound surprised." Howell responded, his mind already planning out their next suicidal move. The other crewmember that had been operating their guns looked back at his captain with a look of horror and disbelief on his face.

"Ma'am? Is this really a good idea?" His voice was much higher and squeakier than Howell would have thought for a man of his size, but maybe fear had something to do with that.

"It's our only idea right now." Larrin reminded him. She leapt gracefully out of the pilot's chair and pulled out a communicator from her belt.

"Star, you there?" She asked hesitantly, pursing her lips as she waited for the girl to answer.

"â€|barely, Captain Larrin. What just happened?" Star asked feebly, the sounds of sirens and sparks flying coming over the small radio. Larrin smirked a little and nodded to Howell, though there was no way for Star to see it.

"I took a Marine's advice. Let's see where it gets us." Howell blinked in annoyance, but said nothing. "How long do you need to fix the hyper-drive?"

"Captain, I hate to say it, but I'm not sure it can be fixed. We've just blown out too many components to get it running again. We'll need a month in dry-dock if we want to salvage it at all." Star said weakly. Howell was more than a little surprised; the last Traveler ship they'd encountered had given Doctor Zelenka a migraine; a fifteen year old girl kept a similar engine running far longer than the Atlantian scientist thought possible. If Star, Krag, and Peabody really couldn't fix it, or at least give an optimistic report, than the situation was bad. Really, really bad.

"Acknowledged." Larrin turned off the communicator and tucked it back into her belt while giving Howell a curious look.

"Okay soldier. Now what? Is there a part two to your daring plan?"

Howell smiled, just a little anyway, and nodded slowly. "Yes there is. But you're not going to like it."

\* \* \*

><p>"You weren't kidding. I hate this idea, actually." Larrin said with a noticeable edge in her voice. She was blocking Howell's way, arms folded and jaw set. Howell would rather have faced another few Wraith drones than have to go through an angry Larrin, but it would have to be done.<p>

"I've barely said two words!" Howell objected, stepping closer to the woman.

"Let me get this straight. There are Wraith on the other side of this doorâ€|" Larrin said patronizingly, nodding at the airlock behind her, "â€|and you want to open that door, and let them in."

"Not quite." Howell argued as he watched the rest of his team arrive. "I want to let us out. Big difference."

A week prior Howell had no sense of humor and little tolerance for other people's. That had already started to change, even with all of the insanity he'd been subjected to. If you wanted to work with Larrin, you had to play her game.

"Just hear me out. On the other side of that door is a hive shipâ€|" Howell started to say. Larrin cut him off by nodding and giving him a look of 'We are all aware!'

"A hive ship with a working hyper-drive! These things normally

transport cruisers in their cavities; it'll work for us too. All we have to do is fight our way through their already severely depleted troops and make our way inside." Howell outlined, talking a little louder now that his team was squeezed into the narrow hallway. A dozen or so Travelers were also standing by in case the Wraith decided to knock down the door before they were done talking.

"Major Bane and Major Krag will go to their engineering spaces and fire up the hyper-drive. They'll take the coordinates of your home-world, or wherever else you think is safe for us, and they'll dial it into the computer there. Krag can read and write in Wraith and Bane can protect him long enough to do all of this." Howell explained, nodding to each of his men in turn.

"Major Bacon and I will go to the bridge and vent the atmosphere from all of the decks except the ones leading back here, and any Wraith left alive will suffocate. We kill all the Wraith and use their engines to get us to safety. It's a win-win, and also our only option. We can't just sit here and wait for them to come knocking, and even if our sub-lights and hyper-drive were operational right now, which they aren't, we're jammed in here." Howell reminded her, watching as her expression slowly softened.

"He's right; the ship has started a hull-regeneration cycle and they're purposely growing the hull around us. We're not going anywhere without a much larger salvage team." Star said over the intercom. She and who knew how many others had been listening in, and apparently she felt the need to comment on the plan.

"It's our only option, and you know it. So get out of my and let my team through." Howell said quietly enough that only Larrin could hear him.

"One condition. She said forcefully, stepping even closer to him. They were practically nose to nose now.

"Two of my men accompany each team, and I go with you."

Howell started to object, but got a better idea instead. He nodded politely and turned to his people. Larrin seemed suspicious that he'd given in so easily, but said nothing.

"Alright; you heard the plan. Bane, Krag, and whoever Larrin wants to accompany youâ€| She interrupted him mid-sentence as she checked the load on her gun.

"Mason and Onus."

"The four of you will fight your way to engineering and enter in the course. Larrin, do you have a good spot in mind for us to take this tub?" Howell asked.

"I think so; I'll have Star transmit the coordinates to us when we're inside."

"Good. Bacon, you and I plusâ€| He stopped on his own and waited for Larrin.

"Robble and me." Satisfied the cartridge was full, she flicked it back into the gun expertly and twirled the whole thing back into the

holster. She reminded Howell of an old-west gunslinger ready to ride into the O.K. Corral.

"The four of us will head to the bridge and vent all the atmosphere from the rest of the hive. Any questions?"

The man Larrin had indicted was Robble raised his hand and looked at Howell strangely.

"Wraith tech takes Wraith DNA to fly. How are you going to get around that?"

"Worst case scenario I cut off somebody's hand and use that to initialize it. Any other questions?" Howell asked sincerely, looking around at team member in turn.

Bacon didn't look brokenhearted or miserable any more. He had a savage, animalistic look in his eye and a brand-new Traveler gun in his holster. He looked ready to take on the whole hive himself.

Krag had a more weathered, experienced look to him that Howell hadn't seen before. Either battle on the planet or the work on the hyper-drive had done something to him. Howell had been trying to do that something ever since he'd been ordered to take Krag; he was glad now that he'd succeeded, somewhat.

Bane alone stood and stared at Howell knowingly. Howell swallowed hard and tried not to betray anything but confidence, but his old friend knew something. Thankfully, all he did was stare and finger his own weapon. He didn't pull it out of the holster; he just gently rested two fingers on it, gently stroking the leather handle. He definitely knew, and Howell hoped he would keep the secret.

"Alright. Let's move out. Open the door." Howell ordered. Every man and woman in the short corridor drew their weapons, and Larrin tapped the panel control.

One, lone, unfortunate drone was standing on the other side, stunner in hand. He didn't even have the chance to fire it before twenty red Traveler rounds blasted his face, chest and arms. What was left of him dropped to the deck and twitched a few times.

"One drone? Only one Wraith was sent to guard the door to our ship?" Larrin demanded, sounding disappointed. Howell shrugged and scanned the corridor ahead for any stragglers.

"Guess the last battle wiped out more of their troops than we thought." It did still bother him though; there should have been more Wraith.

"Alright, let's move!" Larrin shouted. All eight of the invasion force ran across the threshold and into the Wraith corridor, weapons still raised.

"Bane, take your men and head in that direction." Howell ordered, pointing down one hallway. "It leads to engineering. We'll go this way," He pointed the opposite direction and checked for any other Wraith that might have been wandering through. "And find the bridge."

"Hold on, how do you know so much about Wraith hive ships?" Larrin asked, flicking a strand of hair out of her eyes as she did so.

"My team and I recently had to clean one out after Sheppard dumped it in the ocean outside of Atlantis. Let's just say that I'm more than familiar with these things by now." Howell said darkly, still getting a chill up his spine every time he thought about the drones they'd found dead and dying in the various compartments. A drone without a mask with gore dripping from its teeth is not a pretty sight.

Krag, Mason, Onus, all wiry looking men in their early twenties, ran down the corridor while Bane hesitated. He stared at Howell for a split second, a look of utter disapproval on his face, and then jogged to catch up with his team.

"What was that about?" Larrin demanded as she and Howell led the way down the remaining corridor. Howell shook his head and refused to meet her gaze.

"I'll tell you later." Larrin didn't look at all pleased with the answer, but let it go for sake of not drawing any more attention to themselves. Wraith had good hearing, and they were all expecting another attack any second.

They ran for around five minutes down the dark, creepy looking Wraith corridor before Howell saw the telltale sign of movement and stopped.

"Wraith! Down!" He shoved Larrin aside as a stun blast flew past, and the other two behind him dropped to a kneeling position.

Five Wraith drones were waiting to ambush them, long rifles leveled and firing steadily. Robble and Bacon returned fire intermittently, trying to find cover in the narrow space. There was little to none to be found, and the large man Robble narrowly avoided a blast to the knee.

Larrin whipped out her own weapon, fired three times, and there suddenly only two Wraith blocking their path. Howell shot the other two as a stun blast flew past him, and slyly slipped his own gun into stun mode.

"That was close; are you guysâ€¦" Larrin stood up, faced the corridor ahead, and foolishly turned her back on Howell. He fired once, the blast hitting her low in the back, and she crumpled to the floor!

"What theâ€¦?" Robble started to turn his gun towards Howell, but Bacon elbowed him in the face and deftly snatched away his gun. The three humans all faced each other, the two Marines holding the confused Traveler at gun point.

"Mind telling me why I did that, Colonel?" Bacon asked nervously, shooting a worried glance Howell's way.

"That's what Bane's look was about. He knew I was going to do that." Howell said, answering Larrin's question. Robble looked totally lost, and Bacon wasn't exactly confident.



"Take Larrin and head back to the ship now. You'll meet up with Bane's team shortly." Howell ordered, running to a console embedded in the wall as he spoke. He pressed four quick commands, and an ear piercing shriek sounded all around them. Another two buttons sealed a door to Howell's left, cutting him off from the rest of his team. He finished by shooting the console and whipping out his radio.

"This is Colonel Howell; the alarm has been sounded! They know we're here, and they're locking down the ship! Get everyone back to the Traveler vessel now!" Howell shouted, breaking into a dead run. A second later, Bane's voice came over the radio.

"Colonel, what's going on?"

"The plan wasn't going to work, Bane, you knew that." Howell accused, checking around a corner as he spoke. His gun was back on kill mode now.

"It might have, sir."

"No, it wouldn't. There's no way to vent the atmosphere from selective areas of the ship, and engineering wouldn't be able to enter in coordinates for a hyper-space jump. Plus, with all the damage to the outer hull, how long do you think this ship will last in hyper-space?" Howell asked, knowing the answer himself. The corridors were thankfully empty; he hadn't seen another Wraith yet.

"We could have figured something else out!" Bane shouted, starting to become out of breath. He must have been running too; he knew what Howell was going to do. But there was no way to stop the Marine now.

"There's no time for that! The Wraith have probably already sent out a call for help to any other Wraith ships in the area! The only way to do this is to get that ship back in Traveler space. With the help of their other ships they can fend off any Wraith attack and you'll all be safe!"

"What about you, sir?" Bane demanded. Ironically, as he asked the question, Howell encountered the first Wraith since the ambush. The commander Wraith lunged for his stunner as he came around a corner, but Howell beat him to the draw and left him lying dead on the floor.

"I'll do what I have to. To see my mission through, just like all the others." Howell had finally reached the bridge; after shooting the three surprised Wraith he found there, he made his way to the pilot's console. Inside the dark bridge, it all looked pretty similar; the Wraith had a flesh-toned horror movie décor going and didn't seem eager to change.

The pilot's console was only distinguishable by the large, finger-shaped apparatus standing on edge on the top of it. He picked up the arm of a dead Wraith, fed its fingers into the small device, and used the limp arm to navigate to the command he wanted on the screen.

"This is the only way. I'll set the coordinates, make the jump, and vent all the atmosphere on this side for safe measure. The ship will

start to disintegrate almost immediately, but hopefully it will last long enough to make it back to Traveler space. There won't be time to make the run back and I'll have to work the controls on this side to make sure the Traveler ship doesn't blow up too." As he was speaking, the nerves and jitters he'd swallowed and forgotten about surfaced again. He felt like throwing up; this was his first suicide mission, and he seriously doubted that it would turn out like all of Colonel Sheppard's. He inhaled the musty, dirty air and tried to calm himself again before moving on. He knew what he'd have to do, and it wasn't the first clandestine mission he'd undertaken.

"Star, have you been listening to this?" Howell asked, hoping the girl would answer.

"Yes." She sounded utterly defeated, like she'd been trying to figure out another way and realized Howell was right. But she had been listening into their radio frequencies, probably courtesy of Peabody, and that's what counted.

"Then feed me the coordinates I need." He translated and entered in each number she gave him, but stopped short of actually engaging the drive. First he needed to handle the Wraith still left alive on the ship; he didn't want Larrin's crew to have to deal with any stragglers that survived the ship breaking up.

As he moved around the bridge, looking for the console he needed, he noticed something strange. Embedded into one of the wall panels was an altogether alien looking screen displaying somewhat familiar diagrams and words. He stopped in mid stride, examined it closer, and realized suddenly what it was.

"Asgard?"

## 11. They are Coming We are Waiting

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\* \* \*

**><p>**When Larrin woke up, she was lying on a bed in the infirmary with a nervous looking doctor leaning over her.**<p>**

"Ma'am? Are you alright?" He stepped back when he saw the look in her eye.

"Howell!" She screamed at the top of her lungs, leapt off the bed, and ran at a dead sprint for the bridge. Anyone in her way wisely dove out of the way; she had an even more crazed look to her than normal.

As she skidded into the bridge, Bane was waiting for her, looking morose.

"What happened? Why did he shoot me? And who the heck does he think he is?" Larrin demanded, literally shaking with rage.

"He's gone. The Wraith ship is totally depressurized and the outer hull is gone." He reported. Another Traveler, the other bridge officer, nodded his head when Larrin looked at him.

"He's right. The Wraith ship's inner core is mostly intact and hyper-drive is functioning normally; Howell even managed to transfer control of the drive here, though I don't know how. We're ten minutes out fromâ€¦" He stopped short as Larrin's jaw dropped open. Suddenly, all her fire and all her rage was gone.

"What? What do you mean he'sâ€¦?"

"He's dead, Captain Larrin. It was his intention from the start." Bane answered. He filled her in on everything Howell had planned, but she barely heard him. Her breath caught in her throat and her stomach churned as the realization hit her. She'd been ready to kill him herself a second ago, but now he was really gone. Dead, just like so many others.

"I barely knew him." She practically whispered. Bane nodded and looked sympathetic.

"No one did, ma'am. That's the way he wanted it." There was silence on the bridge for a long time before Bane spoke again.

"By seniority, I am now in command of my people. Please alert me when we reach your destination. I'll inform them of the loss of the Colonel." With that, Bane saluted her unexpectedly and left the bridge.

The other crewman wisely left the room, and Larrin sank into the pilot's chair thoughtfully. She hadn't known him. She only found out his first name an hour ago. She'd fought with him and deeply considered not taking him onboard in the first place. And yet she almost missed him. He was no Sheppard, but she missed him.

Sitting alone in the bridge, Larrin was left to her thoughts as the Traveler ship raced onward, its Wraith shell carrying them homeward.

\* \* \*

><p>"Captain Larrin? We're ready to drop out of hyper-space."<p>

Larrin acknowledged the other crewmember with a stiff nod. He'd returned to the room after half an hour, obviously nervous about being in the same room with his captain. She wasn't upset; that's what she kept telling herself. She was annoyed, a little tired from being stunned, and slowly coming off of an adrenaline rush. She wasn't upset.

"The command has been entered in, but the Wraith drive isâ€¦" The man was interrupted by the sudden jerk to normal space. The inertial dampeners being offline for their 'docking' had been rough; even at a mere ten percent of normal it softened the blow of returning to

normal space.

"The Wraithâ€| husk, I guess you could call it, is almost fully disintegrated. If we land the ship the rest should burn off." The officer suggested, turning to face her.

"Good idea. Contact fleet command and clear our landing; I'll be back in a minute." Larrin said quietly, walking out of the bridge quickly.

Over the past few days her ship had seen even more damage and abuse than normal; it wasn't as apparent inside the decks as it was on the outside, but she could still tell. The ship itself was a new command; after she'd lost her Ancient Aurora class ship, she'd had a hard time getting a command at all. Her escapade with Colonel Sheppard made a few of her colleagues frown from their lofty council seats, but the loss of the massive ship and her ordering Captain Katana into action had made heads roll. She was still a Captain, and that was almost as good as a council member, but if ever a unanimous vote came through, she'd be in trouble. The chances of that happening were slim, but still present.

The crew hadn't favored much better than the ship; far too many regular faces weren't there anymore. Of course the men and women who'd died on the battlefield would be her friends; she only befriended the bold and the reckless. They would be the type to charge headfirst into battle.

Her goal was to reach the bunk rooms where the Marines were sleeping; she'd had one of her people show them to the bunk rooms and all but order them to get some sleep. Not that she'd have listened herself; the loss of a commander was always rough. She'd lost her own Captain years ago; it was what turned the hyper-drive specialist and expert pilot into the Captain her crew knew and feared today. She knew they'd be going through a lot, first from the loss of Major Jones and now Howellâ€|

"I say we just steal another Wraith ship and fly home ourselves! This isn't our battle, we don't need toâ€|"

"Thankfully, this isn't a democracy!"

"I didn't ask you, pipsqueak! Go flirt with your blonde-mechanic and leave the big boys to discuss this!"

Larrin heard the argument from the other side of the closed door and hesitated to open it. She expected to hear what must have been Krag hit Bacon, but instead, the room got deadly quiet.

"We have a visitor. Behave yourselves." Bane's voice rang out in a very cold and clear way, and door creaked open.

"Am I interrupting something?" Larrin asked, stepping into the small bunkroom. Bacon was standing up, arms folded and face red with anger on one side of the room. Krag was in the other corner with a cold and furious look in his eye that she hadn't seen before, while Peabody was standing in the middle. It looked like he'd been trying to separate them, but she could tell he was barely holding it together himself. Bane alone seemed in control of himself, and was holding the door open beside her.

"As a matter of fact, you are!" Bacon sneered, answering her question. Bane shot him a warning look, which he ignored.

"You did this, didn't you? Convinced him to run that suicide mission by batting your eyelashes and talking nice and sweet, didn't you?" Bacon pointed a finger in Larrin's face, spit with every word and got so close to her that she could smell his breath.

Before anyone could react, Larrin grabbed his arm, twisted it around behind his back and kicked him in the rear so hard he slammed into the metal bulkhead. He sank to the floor groaning and twitching.

"I think he needed that." Larrin told Bane, her hand straying close to her gun out of habit. They were all armed still, and had just been talking about hijacking a ship. It suddenly hit her that she might be in actual danger.

"Yes. He did. Please sit down." Bane said politely, sliding a chair over to her. Krag noticeably relaxed, Peabody sank back down onto his bed, and Bacon started to come to his senses.

The bunkroom was fairly large; eight rows of metal bunk beds were arranged in a grid with lockers on all sides and a few chairs strewn around. The lights were missing a few bulbs here and there that no one had bothered to replace, but there was no exposed wiring or missing deck panels like other areas of the ship.

As Larrin cautiously took her seat, she waited for Bane to do the same while she tried to figure out what to say. As it turned out, he spoke first.

"I apologize for our behavior. We're all a little shaken up lately." Bane explained softly, his eyes boring into hers like drills. He didn't seem angry or upset; if anything, it was like he was calm. Like he knew this was coming and had already prepared for it.

"I can understand that. You lost two people in twenty four hours; I know from experience that's rough." Larrin admitted. Unable to bear the man's stare, she looked down at her boots and pursed her lips.

"We're approaching my home-world now. I know you all want to get home, believe me, I understand that, but you have to realize that our ships can't make the trip between galaxies. If we could, we would. A galaxy without Wraith is starting to sound good right about now." As she spoke she realized that the comment was poor taste, but thought an apology would only sound worse.

"What I'm trying to say is that I'll do everything I can to help you, but I'm afraid that won't be much."

"We knew the odds weren't in our favor." Bane told her, looking back at his men. Bacon was now nursing a bloody nose and sitting in the far corner of the room, trying to ignore them. "With Atlantis gone we can't dial Earth. With the inter-galactic gate bridge gone and Midway destroyed, that's out too. And from I was told, the Daedalus and Apollo are too badly damaged to help either. They probably think we're all dead by now." He reflected, almost smiling now.

"I don't think there is any way for us to go home. Bret Jones and John Howell died fighting the Wraith. I think I'll do the same." His voice took on a much stronger, more determined tone.

"So will I." Krag spoke up from the back, looking far darker and more sinister than before. Hatred does strange things to people, and in this case, he was the stronger for it.

"And I as well." Peabody swallowed hard before standing up next to Bane. He and Howell had gotten along well, and Jones death hadn't hit him yet. It would take a while for Howell's to sink in too. He wasn't used to losing friends so quickly or traumatically.

"Don't leave me out." Bacon mumbled, rising from his bed in the back. He walked forward, with a bloody bandage still pressed to his nose and hung his head in shame.

"I'm sorry Ma'am. I lost it a little back there. It won't happen again." He sounded sincere, and Larrin believed him when he said it. She grinned a little for his benefit and tried to make light of it.

"Don't worry. Travelers play rough. It takes a lot to offend us."

"I'm not sure what difference it makes to you, but you've earned a friend here, Captain. You helped us and trusted us when you had no reason to. Howell and Jones started to repay that debt, and we will finish the job. What can we do, Captain? What are our orders?" Bane asked suddenly. Everyone in the room looked to her, seeming to mirror his question.

Larrin smiled a little, despite the tense atmosphere of the room. "You've more than repaid any debt you owed us. But if you're looking for a fight, you might be in luck." She stood up as she spoke and started pacing.

"A few months ago the Attero device took out the gate on our first land colony in a hundred generations. The resulting blast destroyed not only our Ancient battleship but two other Traveler ships as well. Not mention the seven hundred civilians that had been setting up our colony. We were all so shaken up that we decided to settle on land again, but this time, on a world without a gate. We didn't have enough ships to pack up and leave all at once, so we had to make several trips to ferry everyone back and forth." She explained, still agitated by the memory of it. That had been a rough week for everyone involved.

"This new planet was almost perfect. Off the beaten path, no gate anywhere near by, no detectable Wraith signatures within light-years. The only obvious problem was the planet itself; since the Ancient's hadn't put a Stargate on the planet, they'd had no reason to terra-form it. It was a barren, snowy wasteland that could barely support life; the Wraith would never think to look for us there." Larrin paused here, wrestling with the decision to tell them more. But as Bane stared at her with his almost innocent, expressionless face, her doubt disappeared. Who were they going to tell?

"Our high council forbid any ship captain from telling anyone, anywhere about our home-world. But I consider you four part of my

crew, which means I can tell you whatever I want." Larrin explained with a rebellious smile.

"We'd barely managed to set up shop on this planet before we realized what a bad choice that planet was. The Wraith had a small outpost in a nearby system that they immediately started fortifying. Through some creative investigating, we found out that a Queen and her alliance of hives had moved into town. They built a massive facility, three docks to support their hives as well as the half a dozen cruisers they brought in later. Not a good situation." Larrin said needlessly. Bacon sneered and looked ready to spit every time Larrin said the word 'Wraith', and she could understand how he felt.

"So we've taken to hiding and running shadow maneuvers. My ship messed up and caught the attention of a cruiser. We were on the run and getting desperate when we met you." She nodded to Bane and the rest of the men who were all listening closely. Krag looked thoughtful, like he was rolling their problems around in his head while she spoke. They'd had a few problems lately, and she was honestly glad to have fresh eyes on some of them. Star was getting overworked lately, and Larrin was still upset about losing Nevik the day she met Sheppard. She'd known her last engineer since she was a child.

"But unfortunately, when that Wraith hive showed up during the battle on the planet's surface, they must have gotten off a call to the rest of the alliance. And since we had to fly straight to our planet in order to save this ship, we've led those same Wraith right to us. We're now tracking five more hives and three cruisers heading straight here." She pounded her fist into her palm to drive her point home.

"We've arrived at my home-world now and we're preparing to land, but it doesn't look good." Larrin stopped pacing and leaned on the back of the chair, folding her hands in front of her. Bane had remained motionless as he listened to her, looking very thoughtful.

"The Wraith are coming here, and if we don't stop them, my people will be wiped out. Our ships are only getting older, and even in their prime we wouldn't have been able to take on the fleet that's coming here now. Basically, we're preparing for the fight of our lives, and I'm starting to think we're going to lose it. Are you still sure you want to stay?"

The question was sincere. Larrin figured she owed it to the men to at least and try and take them away from the battle; the nearest gate was only a few hours away by hyper-space and there were ships that could do it. But as she prepared for the worst, Bane actually smiled!

"Ma'am, we've been in a losing fight ever since we came to this galaxy. The Wraith have almost always been to blame for the battles we've had to fight. This sounds no different." He stood up to face her and was joined by the rest of his men, all looking hardened and determined.

"Colonel Howell would've wanted us to stay. It's not like we have a whole lot of other options. We'll stay and help, however we can, Captain."

## 12. Hold the Line!

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\* \* \*

><p>As Larrin's ship was approaching the icy surface of their world, the last of the Wraith hull melted off of them and burnt up in the atmosphere. With only maneuvering thrusters online, Larrin was having to put all her concentration on the task of landing her ship without merely crashing it into the unforgiving ice.<p>

Between two rocky crags jutting out of the ice and snow, the lights of their massive hangar appeared and seemed to beckon her inside. With jets of orange flame shooting out at all angles, the Traveler vessel slowly descended and decelerated into position inside the hangar. Behind them, twin doors crawled forward a few feet at a time to seal off the inner space from the harsh environment outside.

"Home at last." The crewman in front of her said with a sigh. Larrin shook her head and snorted.

"For now, at least. Don't get attached; we might be leaving again soon." Larrin turned to leave the bridge again when she was stopped by the man's voice.

"Captain? The fleet is launching in the other hangars!"

Larrin whirled around to see eight Traveler vessels being launched from various hangars around the planet, all heading for orbit. At one point, they'd had a total of thirteen ships, counting the Ancient Aurora-class ship. But after the battle over the Replicator home-world and the Attero device disaster, they were down to a mere nine. And with her ship out of commission, that brought the not-so-grand total down to eight. Eight small ships versus five hives and three cruisers; the odds couldn't have been much worse.

As the ground crews all rushed in to secure her ship, she found herself thinking about Howell again. If he were here, she'd at least have someone to talk to. To mock, to annoy, to flirt with occasionally, but mostly to talk to. He'd come up with a few crazy plans in the short time she'd known him, and that's exactly what they needed now. A crazy, desperate plan to somehow salvage the situation she'd put her people into.

\_She\_ had risked her ship and crew to secure the Ancient ship.

\_She\_ had kidnapped Sheppard and gotten Silas and Nevik killed in the process.

\_She\_ had suggested they settle down on land for the first time in



generations.

And now \_she\_, Larrin, the fearless Traveler captain, would have to watch while her home was leveled by the Wraith she had brought to them. She wanted to kill someone, but the only Wraith nearby were out of reach. She would have settled for messing with Howell, but even he was gone now too.

With one last look at her ship, sitting in the hangar with crews swarming around trying to repair it, Larrin headed to the Council Chambers to report her 'progress' and discuss what was to come next.

As the elevator doors shut and the car descended even farther down to the base below, Larrin leaned back against the wall and put her head in her hands. There was no where to run. No where to hide.

Far above them, eight Traveler ships hovered in a line. They would have to make their final stand. All of the captains knew the risk; this was little more than a suicide mission. Five hives, three cruisers. All heading straight for the frozen world the Travelers now called home. If it had just been eight cruisers, they'd have stood a good chance. But five hives? It wasn't possible.

Traveler ships weren't weak and neither were their captains. They knew the odds, they knew the options, and they were prepared to fight to the last man. They'd agreed to concentrate fire on the hives; they'd be the ones launching the most darts and housing the most troops. If they could destroy even two of the massive ships, their people on the ground stood a better chance during the ground battle.

And so they waited, eyes glued to sensor readouts, pulses pounding, as the Wraith ships drew nearer.

Back on the ground, Larrin walked determinedly down the long, dark corridor that led to the council chambers. She knew she was in for it; most of the troubles they had were Larrin's fault. Or at least that's what she had reasoned out. She doubted that the five man council would be any \_more\_ reasonable and forgiving than that.

She'd changed into her nicer uniform; a much less revealing black leather jacket with matching pants and recently shined boots. It wasn't a dress uniform, but it was the best she had after her personal belongings had been accidentally blown out into space after a hull breach.

She took a deep breath, blinked to clear her vision, and reached out to open the door.

"Wait! Captain Larrin, wait!" A distinctively British voice echoed down the corridor, startling Larrin enough to make her jump back.

"What are you doing here?"

"Coming to talk to your Parliament, obviously. This is where they meet, I presume?" Peabody asked, slightly out of breath from his run. He was in the standard Atlantian civilian uniform; dark grey with a

colored stripe on the chest that Larrin didn't understand the meaning of. He leaned on his knees to catch his breath while trying to explain himself at the same time.

"We were told we had free reign of the base since we were your guests. And I heard that you were on your way to a meeting with your superiors. I thought you might want some assistance." He finally recovered enough to stand upright, straighten his uniform, and nod to Larrin respectfully.

"If I'm welcome, of course."

"Okay first of all, it's a council, not a 'Parliament'. And second, this isn't a party anyone can show up to." Larrin said harshly, folding her arms. "I'm reporting my progress, or lack thereof, and getting ready to be stripped of my rank. Not something I want an audience for."

"Oh I disagree!" Peabody said heartily, getting ready to launch into a speech.

"I may not have been entirely useful lately. I'll be the first to admit that I know next to nothing about hyper-drives and engines and such, other than Atlantian versions, mind you. And I may not be a young, strapping Marine that can kill Wraith with his bare hands." He straightened his uniform unnecessarily, smiled disarmingly at her, and put a hand on her shoulder.

"But I'd never forgive myself if I let you go in there and get in trouble on our behalf without at least attempting to help. You've given us a chance at survival, which was more than we had a few days ago. It would be my honor to help defend you during this hearing, or inquisition, or whatever it is you call it." His tone was almost fatherly, even though he couldn't have been more than a few years older than her. All at once, he dropped the soft, sympathetic tone and turned back to the door.

"So, shall we ring them up or just barge in?"

The Wraith ships were almost in position. They'd dropped out of hyper-space early, probably to let their hulls regenerate before the coming battle. The Traveler ships all raised their shields and powered their weapons, preparing for the worst.

Captain Katana Labrea strummed her fingers on the armrest of her chair, watching the screen in front of her carefully. Her ship was considered the fastest in the fleet, but that didn't help much when fighting in a line. She was itching for the chance to charge at the coming Wraith herself, but she knew one lone Traveler ship would be torn apart by that fleet.

As she watched, a strange image appeared in front of the Wraith ships, and she quickly moved to zoom in. The pilot behind her moaned softly as they both recognized what they were seeing.

"Darts! They're sending in a wave of darts! Warn the other ships and divert as much power as you can to shields!" Katana adjusted her targeting computer and gave the fired a test shot out of the forward guns. Their cannons were almost too slow to hit the quick moving Wraith fighters. Almost being the key word.

"Here they come!"

"Captain Beatrice Larrin. You have been summoned before this council to give a full report on your actions in the past three weeks." The elderly woman stated dryly, reading from a paper in front of her.

"I didn't know your first name was Beatrice!" Peabody whispered to Larrin. Without seeming to move her lips, she replied,

"Say it again and I'll rip your tongue out."

The Traveler Council was made up of five representatives; each some of the oldest of the Traveler people. The theory was that if they'd lived this long without being killed by either the Wraith or some other accident, they must know something most people don't.

The chamber they were standing in was completely round, like an arena. The five council members sat in formation equal distances apart and looked down at Larrin and Peabody disapprovingly. Peabody especially got a few nasty looks.

"Why, pray tell, have you brought this man with you to our private meeting?" The woman speaking asked harshly. Her white hair was tied up in a loose bun and her red council robes were hanging loosely around her like a large blanket.

"Excuse me, if I may be allowed to speak?" Peabody asked with only a small amount of sarcasm.

"My name is Percival Peabody. I work, or worked, I suppose, with the Atlantis Expedition. My people came to this galaxy in search of answers about our ancestors and the civilization they left behind. We were of course overjoyed to meet alliesâ€¦" He nodded at Larrin here. "â€¦and thoroughly displeased to meet our mutual enemies, the Wraith. I assure you, we mean you and your people no harm. We have worked together in the past, the very recent past, I might add, and I do believe we will stick around for the near future. I am a qualified representative of my people, the people of Earth." Peabody said grandly, nodding politely to the woman in front of him as he spoke.

"I didn't know you were a qualified representative of your people." Larrin whispered to him.

"Say it any louder and I'll leave you here." Peabody answered in the same tone.

"Well, Doctor Peabodyâ€¦" The woman started, looking down at him condescendingly.

"Mister Peabody, actually. Never finished that blasted thesisâ€¦"

"\_Mister\_ Peabody, then, why exactly have you chosen to appear before us?" She asked in a cold tone. Her eyes seemed far sharper than Peabody would have guessed for a woman of her age, and her four counterparts seemed to fear her slightly. None of them had spoken, though there was no obvious difference of rank or seniority.

"Because, your council-ness? I am considered part of Captain Larrin's crew, and I feel the need to take my share of the blame for the disasters of the past few days. You see, I first encountered Captain Larrin when"

"they sent in another wave! We are screwed!" The pilot yelled over the alarms sounding. Katana Labrea shook her head and gritted her teeth as she fired another round at the incoming wave.

"Just keep the shields up as long as you can! They're trying to wear us down before the rest of the fleet shows up!"

Dart after dart flew in low over the line of Traveler ships as cannon fire lit up the space around them. Firing their small guns continually, the crazed pilots flew straight into the Traveler's shields in a Kamikaze run! The three darts exploded on impact, and the shields under them visibly buckled.

The upper atmosphere of the planet was now buzzing with the swarm of darts. Traveler cannon fire destroyed dozens of darts every second, but more kept coming! The darts were too fast to be hit every time, but the large Traveler ships were easy targets. Slowly, the shields of the human fleet started to buckle, and then break.

"Keep firing! Destroy every last one of them!" Katana shouted, punctuating every word with another shot. Five more darts were blown to pieces, but more flew in to take their place!

"This is about to get ugly"

"but no worse than the truth of the situation. Colonel Howell was gone, the Wraith ship was in pieces, and we were still stuck in the middle of it. I assure you, any blame that you feel inclined to shove off on Captain Larrin should be placed squarely on my shoulders." Peabody said forcefully, actually stamping his foot on the stone floor.

"My people suggested that we fight the Wraith on the ground. My people forced Captain Larrin to rendezvous with the Earth fleet, and my people set the direct course for this planet. We are totally at fault for your current predicament."

"Predicament? Is that what you call this?" One of the men on the council, standing behind Peabody, spoke up for the first time.

"Forgive me. Your 'extinction level event which happens to be transpiring on this frozen piece of"

"shields! Shields are down and we're taking hull damage!" The pilot shouted. Katana shook her head in frustration as she watched the darts swarm around one of the other ships. She had one idea left and it wasn't a good one.

"Tell the other ships to follow our lead!" Katana ordered, taking one last shot at a passing dart.

"And what is 'our lead'?"

"Down! We're going down, into the atmosphere! The darts will burn up!"

"So will we!" The pilot argued. But he was already entering in the coordinates and powering the engines.

"Eventually, but not before they do! Take us down as hard and fast as you can!"

Katana knew it was a long shot. Without shields her hull could only stand so much abuse, and there was always a chance that the darts would break off the attack run before the heat got to them. But Wraith pilots tended to get tunnel vision in situations like this; she was counting on them following them down all the way.

"Burn, youâ€¦!"

"â€¦blatant disregard of our laws and regulations!" The angry lady had been going on for close to three minutes straight about how Larrin couldn't have screwed up more if she'd tried.

"These 'allies' of yours are the most dangerous threat to our people besides the Wraith! The Wraith I do not blame! They feed on instinct, and attack our people because their nature demands it! But these peopleâ€¦!" She paused, as if overcome by her anger. She swallowed hard and pursed her lips in a scowl.

"They have no excuse! They awoke the Wraith! They revived these 'Replicators', they activated the Attero device! And in our hour of need, they took it upon themselves to relocate the city of the Ancestors to their own galaxy! They are personally responsible for the loss of four of our ships! Over a thousand of our people already gone! And you would bring them here, to our last stand, to have them sabotage us yet again?"

"You're right." Peabody said suddenly, mulling over the facts. Larrin shot him a concerned look, which he ignored.

"We have made mistakes. Big ones. Most of which you actually haven't heard of. But I would like to remind you of something you seem to have forgotten."

The woman's eyes grew wide at his comment, and she looked ready to leap over the stone platform she sat on to strangle Peabody herself!

"We are still here." He pointed to the ground beneath his feet and stared unblinkingly up at the council members, one by one.

"We are still here! When the Wraith challenged us, slaughtered our people and destroyed our only hope of survival, we beat them back! When they attacked our allies, we rescued them from danger! When an enemy as ancient as the gate-builders themselves tried to destroy us with a weapon so great not even you could comprehend it's power, we stood fast! We overcame the odds! We fought back!" He was practically shouting now, and even Larrin looked impressed. He walked around in a circle, seeming to accuse each council member in turn.

"For the first time in generations, the Wraith are under attack! We

stood up to them! Challenged the status quo! We brought the fight to them!" He stopped walking, and turned back to face the head council member, his nostrils flaring like a bull ready to charge.

"And here we stand. We will not go silently into the waiting arms of our enemies. We. Will. Fight!"

Silence descended on the council chambers as each one of them considered Peabody's words. Larrin rested a hand on his shoulder and mouthed the words 'thank you'. Finally able to catch his breath, Peabody nodded and gave a crooked smile.

"It has come to my attention that we have wandered away from the original topic of conversation." Another woman that hadn't spoken up before stood up and stared at Peabody.

"Our discussion was on the conduct of Captain Beatrice Larrin." Larrin noticeably bristled at the mention of her name, but said nothing.

"After reviewing the evidence of Captain Larrin's conduct in recent days, I have personally come to a conclusion. I hereby initiate a council vote. All in favor of revoking the rank and privileges of the accused?"

Peabody whirled around, staring into the eyes of each council member in turn. He had no idea what was about to happen, and hoped that he hadn't made it worse. But as he watched, not a single hand was raised in the air!

"The council has voted. Captain Larrin, you have our continued faith and confidence. For now." The woman returned to her seat and said no more, looking totally indifferent.

But as they watched, the woman who had so obviously despised Larrin and Peabody glared down at them again.

"You are dangerous, Beatrice. You always have been. But for now, you are most dangerous to the Wraith. Be sure it stays that way." Larrin nodded stiffly at her, fists balled up as if ready for a fight.

"Now take your friend and return to your ship." Peabody perked up as he turned to go, but Larrin hesitated long enough to put in one last remark.

"Yes, mother."

### 13. I Just Fell for You!

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><p>"Wait!" Larrin's mother, assuming that Peabody had heard her correctly, suddenly stopped them as the communicator on her arm buzzed. She pulled back the red sleeve and listened as the report came in.<p>

"Councilor Larrin?" The voice asked, clearly in distress. "The battle in orbit has been lost! Our fleet is descending to the surface now, under heavy fire from the Wraith fleet! They just arrived in orbit and are bombarding our surface installations! One ship took a hit to their engines and crashed into the ice miles north of here, the rest have made it into their hangars. We are about to be invaded!"

The news hit Captain Larrin like a ton of bricks. Their ships had failed? Their only line of defense, their only plan and hope of survival was that the fleet could hold off the Wraith in orbit! In the tunnels of the Traveler complex, the Wraith would hunt them down like rabbits in a hole!

"What? What is it, I'm busy!" Peabody whispered, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. He was talking into his earpiece, and the voice on the other end was talking so loud that they all heard him say,

"Howell!"

The sight of five Wraith hive ships isn't one that fills anyone with joy. Added to the three cruisers, it was actually sickening. As the remaining darts were buzzing back into their bays, sensors showed that they were preparing to send another volley down to the planet. It was almost a shame that they wouldn't get the chance.

When's the only time people look at Wraith ships and smile? Why, when they're on fire, of course! And as the hyper-space window opened, spewing the battered Sun Tzu out and into the fray, this became a distinct possibility.

All at once, the fleet of Wraith ships was breaking apart. Brilliant beams of white and blue shot out of the Sun Tzu's forward array, impacting the Wraith ships with a massive explosion. Giant pieces of Wraith ship material drifted apart with flames still gushing out! One hive and two cruisers were blown away before the rest got smart and retreated, their engines lighting up as they jumped to hyper-space.

The still somewhat crippled Sun Tzu drifted into a stable orbit, almost protectively hovering above the Traveler world as the Wraith fled.

"How's your air supply?" Colonel John Howell asked, turning to the woman in the space suit next to him.

"I've got another half an hour left, according to this meter. Told you we had plenty of time!" The woman said with a predatory edge to her voice. The former Genii soldier was manning the helm of the Earth ship; the lessons Howell had given her had paid off.

The sight was still fresh in Howell's mind; an entire Armada of Wraith ships being burnt to a crisp by the salvaged beam weaponsâ€¦ He couldn't have planned it better if he'd tried. He would have

preferred to have been there earlier, but he had other things to take care of first.

"One hive and two cruisersâ€¦ I'd hoped to get more!" Yala sighed, looking like a pouting child in her seat.

"Well, maybe next time. For now, let's get out of these suits. I've only got a few minutes left on my tank." Howell jumped up, his inflated suit unfolding and giving him an extra spring in his step, and headed for another console.

"Well, we could always share my suit. There's plenty of room in here for two!" Yala suggested, trying to pose seductively in the bulky white suit. It didn't work.

"Didn't work the last three times and won't work this time. Engaging transport, now." A blinding light engulfed them both, and they were both whisked off of the airless bridge.

"That'sâ€¦ that's not possible!" Captain Larrin was standing in the command center of the Traveler base, staring in disbelief at the screen in front of her. The Wraith were gone; what little was left of them was burning up in the atmosphere. Instead, a single ship was in orbit, and its signature looked familiar.

"What makes you think it's Howell up there? We all saw that hive break apart!" Larrin demanded, whirling on Peabody. He was still smiling broadly, looking dazed at the sudden good news. Larrin wasn't sure which part he was more excited about; the sudden annihilation of the Wraith or the reappearance of Colonel Howell.

"Your ship received a transmission as the Sun Tzu left hyper-space that was clearly recorded by Colonel Howell! He said that he was on his way to help, but his ship was in bad shape and they wouldn't be able to communicate normally. That's all the message said, but it was Howell! The bugger's alive!" Peabody was practically dancing in the darkened room, drawing the attention of the other Travelers present.

"I'll believe that when Iâ€¦" As she was speaking, a bright light half-blinded them all, and suddenly two people appeared in front of them.

Instinctively, all six of the Traveler men and women drew their weapons took aim. But as the two materialized, Larrin recognized one of them.

"Howell!" She ran forward and wrapped him in a huge hug, practically squeezing the life out of him with her head buried in his neck.

"Whoa! It's alright, I'm okay!" Howell awkwardly held the woman for a moment, watching as the other Traveler's slowly put down their weapons. The other newcomer, Yala, wisely stepped out of the way and leaned against another console. Both had shed their white suits and were back in their uniforms, albeit Howell's was a little more torn than the last time they'd seen him.

"I thought you were dead!" Larrin broke the embrace, put hand on his face, and looked almost lovingly into his eyes. Howell stared right



back, shocked that Larrin could be so emotional. He didn't see the sucker punch coming until he was on the floor.

"Don't you ever do that again!" Larrin shouted, leaning over the fallen Marine as he climbed to his feet. His jaw had taken the full force of the furious woman's anger; he ran his tongue over his teeth a few times to make sure they were all there.

"I'm sorry I upset you. But we both knew there wasn't any other way!" Howell shot back as soon as he could speak. He glared up at her, she glared down at him, and everyone else in the room held their breath.

Finally Larrin stormed out of the room in disgust and Howell made it to his feet.

"You alright there, chap?" Peabody said with a half smile, slapping Howell on the back. Howell massaged his jaw once more to make sure nothing was broken before nodding slowly.

"Fine. How is everyone? Did they make it here safely?" Howell asked quickly, looking Peabody over for any new injuries.

"Oh yes, without trouble. We were of course still reeling from what we thought was your untimely death, but I'm sure as soon as we find the boys they'll be feeling much better!" Peabody beamed, flashing a toothy grin Howell's way.

"Glad to hear it. Percy Peabody, this is Yala Morand. She was part of a Genii Special Forces unit that was captured by the Wraith. I was able to beam thirty other survivors, including her, from the hive. We came down first to make sure we were welcome before we beamed them down as well." Howell explained, finally getting around to the introductions. Yala nodded semi-politely to Peabody while picking at a finger nail.

"So, are we welcome? She didn't seem too thrilled to see youâ€¦" Yala said in a patronizing voice, nodding to the door Larrin had stormed out of.

"We'll find out. Peabody, you know anyone in charge around here?"

"Oh, I think so. Don't mention my name though, it might not get you very far." Peabody said suspiciously, leading the way out of the small command center under the watchful eye of the Traveler officers present. They all eyed Yala harshly, while a few noticed the Traveler gun still in Howell's holster and tried to figure out who he was.

"Come on Yala. You too." Howell demanded, crossing his arms and waiting for the woman.

"What, you don't trust me alone?" She asked sarcastically, walking dramatically after Peabody and into the corridor.

"Yala, I wouldn't trust you if you were locked in a cell with an armed guard watching you. Now move your butt before I move it for you!" Howell snapped angrily.

"I sense that's not a sincere offerâ€¦"

"\_Now!\_"\_

\* \* \*

><p>A week passed as the Travelers and their new guests settled down. The Wraith made no move to return after the sudden appearance of the Sun Tzu, which was greatly appreciated by the crews working on her. The ship was put into a new hangar on the outskirts of the Traveler base and repairs were started immediately. If even a single Wraith hive had decided to fire back and fight it out, they would have been in trouble. The shield emitters were nearly fried, the beam weapons would have shorted out after another volley, and all rail guns were out of commission. Thankfully, the surprise of seeing a human battle cruiser defend the Travelers was enough to send them running, at least this time.<p>

The thirty odd survivors of the hive were all fed, clothed, and put to work shortly after. The rag-tag group was composed of eight former Genii, who were all too anxious to help the war effort, sixteen members of a local culture of humans Howell had never heard of before, and there were even six Travelers! The poor souls had volunteered to stay on the ground back when overpopulation was getting desperate, and had been picked up by the hive only a few days prior.

All were fairly traumatized by the near death experience, but they were also grateful to Howell for saving their lives. After he beamed them down to the planet's surface, they had to be ordered by Howell to follow the Traveler's instructions. They had assumed they were going to Atlantis, and were beyond disappointed that were stuck on a frozen world with limited resources. Plus, none of the Marines had realized that the Travelers had a reputation in the Pegasus galaxy, and it wasn't a good one.

"How, baby, how long do we have to stay here?" Yala asked one day as she followed along on one of Howell's routes. He was checking on the repairs to the Sun Tzu, the work crews in the Traveler green house, and finally on the lab where Krag, Star and Peabody were working on a new project.

"Call me 'baby' one more time and I'll throw you out into the snow." Howell said conversationally. Yala started to laugh until she saw the look on his face, and she was suddenly more serious.

"Alright, I get it. All business. Seriously though, how long do we have to stay on this rock? These Travelers are starting to get on my nerves!" She hissed as another brown-leather clad man passed them, giving her a dirty look as he did so.

"Explain to me again why the Genii and Travelers don't get along, and this time leave out the foul language and insults." Howell said as they boarded a small elevator. He pressed the button for the 'Tram' level, and they zoomed. Yala leaned back against the wall and held up five fingers.

"One: They're boring."

Howell sighed and glared at her, but she kept going.

"Two: They're snobs! Their technology is leaps and bounds ahead of even the mighty Earthlings, and they don't share with the rest of us?"

"Your current leader used a prototype nuclear warhead to initiate a coup. And you wonder why no one trusts you with energy based weapons?" Howell asked, half serious. But even he had to admit the younger woman had a point there.

"Three: I don't like them."

"I think the feeling's mutual."

"Rude, and four: While my people have fought and bled and died for the sake of fighting the Wraith, these Travelers have been hiding. They run, they hide, they run some more. Even now they hide beneath a sheet of ice so the Wraith won't come and find them. Cowardly, if you ask me." Yala accused as they stepped out of the elevator.

The Tram level housed a massive subway-like train that ran between all of the major hangars, which combined with their support facilities acted like towns. The Command center had been at the top of the main complex, which contained the new green houses, hospitals, and a few mining operations. The whole base was still very new, and most of it was still under construction. Thankfully, the Travelers had no problem throwing things together quickly and making it work.

"Ever hear of the expression, 'don't throw rocks in glass houses'?" Howell asked as they boarded a mostly empty car. The interior was dark, rusty, and very slip-shod in appearance, but it worked. Howell held onto a handle above them, while Yala decided to stand in front of him and pose for dramatic effect.

"No, but it sounds kind of dumb."

"It means, don't accuse other people of doing the same things you do. Where, exactly, have the Genii been for the past hundred years or so? I seem to remember reading a mission report from my people detailing how the Genii had hidden their entire civilization underground. Cowardly, if you ask me."

"Hey! We came out of the shadows to fight! That's why my team was captured! We were attacking a Wraith outpost when it all hit the fan!" Yala defended, pointing a finger in Howell's face.

She was a pretty little thing; only about five feet tall and maybe a hundred pounds. If she was over twenty five, it was just barely. But despite appearances, she was a cunning fighter. Her bright red hair in a long braid and freckled face suggested she was a farmer's daughter fresh out of the fields, but Howell wasn't stupid enough to believe it.

"And so did the Travelers. You do remember why we had to kick the Sun Tzu into high gear and rush over here, right? They fought and almost died to defend this planet." Howell reminded her as the tram came to a very sudden stop. Yala flew forward, into Howell's arms, and they both almost toppled over.

The tram slowly crept into the station, a buzzer sounded to alert them that they'd stopped, and the doors creaked open. Yala didn't move a muscle, but looked seductively up at Howell.

"I think I just fell for you!"

Howell set her down on a cracked leather seat, somewhat roughly, and cocked his head thoughtfully.

"I think I just dumped you."

The two continued onto the Sun Tzu's hangar, Howell more than anxious to see how much progress had been made. The ship was in very poor shape when the crew had abandoned her; the only pressurized portion of the ship was one F-302 bay. If not for the hangar doors being shut, Howell would have beamed off the Wraith hive and into a vacuum.

As the ship's coordinates were set, Howell had noticed the Asgard looking panel onboard the Wraith bridge. He had no idea why it was there, or what its purpose was, but he still knew how to use it. He'd seen Asgard technology at work on the Odyssey once, and this unit was for some reason displaying Wraith-type commands. It was also incredibly user friendly, and it took only a minute to access the Sun Tzu's computers, and beam himself over to the F-302 bay. As the hive started to jump to hyper-space, he was able to lock onto any remaining life signs and beam them off, hoping to catch any Travelers that hadn't made it back to their ship yet.

He was more than a little surprised when thirty humans appeared beside him, and more than forty Wraith on the other end of the small hangar! It took him a second to beam them outside, into space, while the confused Wraith tried to figure out where they were and how they'd gotten there. After that, he'd found two space suits and a Genii woman willing to help, and gotten the Sun Tzu back in working order.

If the hyper-drive hadn't still been functional, their story might have turned out much differently. But now, looking at the new ship sitting in its dock with crews swarming all over it, Howell knew he'd made the right call bringing her into battle. She still seemed to be chomping at the bit, ready to fly off and take on another fleet.

"What was five?" Howell asked as Yala leaned against the long metal rail beside him.

"Five?"

"You said there were five things you didn't like about the Travelers. You listed four, what was five?"

"Oh, I forgot. But it was good!" Yala said in a determined voice, pointing her finger at Howell again. They were standing on a catwalk far above the hangar floor, overlooking the entire structure. How the Travelers had managed to build the entire complex so quickly escaped him; in twice the time his own people had barely managed to explore a city, let alone build one from scratch.

"I remember now! Larrin doesn't like me!" Yala said far too loudly.

Another few Traveler workers passed them giving the Genii girl dirty looks as they passed. Her Genii uniform was pretty tattered, but still obviously recognizable for what it was. Her loud and forward comments about their hosts didn't help matters.

"Larrin doesn't like anyone." Howell pointed out.

"She likes you. Or, liked, past tense. Where's she been lately, anyway?" Yala looked around the hangar and down the rest of the long catwalk, as if expecting the woman to appear at the mention of her name.

"Her ship is out of commission and her home is flooded with strangers. She's just taking it all in, I guess."

"How's the jaw, by the way?" Yala asked with a mischievous grin. Howell turned to look at her very slowly, glowering the whole time.

"Okay, never mind! I'll go play with Bacon, he's nicer to me!" Yala shouted, running back to the tram. As soon as she was out of sight, Howell grabbed at his radio.

"Bacon, do you read me?" Howell asked, tuning into their assigned frequency. Radio traffic was only getting more and more crowded as all ten ships were being repaired and refitted on the ground.

"Loud and clear, Colonel."

"Yala is heading your way, try to keep an eye on her for me."

"Yes sir. But with all due respect, sir, I don't think she's dangerous. Not as much as those other Genii."

Howell narrowed his eyes and bit his lip at the mention of Yala's team mates. "Maybe, maybe not. At the moment she's acting like a child and needs supervision. If she gets too rowdy, just stun her and lock her up in her quarters."

"Will do. Here she is now. Hey get out of-" Bacon's radio feed was suddenly cut off, and Howell marveled at how fast the girl could move when she wanted to.

#### 14. I Have Mine

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\* \* \*

**><p>"Having fun baby sitting?"<p>**

Howell jumped as someone spoke up from behind him. He whirled around

to see Larrin standing there, leaning against a column.

"I didn't see you there."

"That was the point." She said in a sharp tone. Her hair was tied back, her uniform looked far too formal, and even her expression seemed stressed. It was a new look on her, and if she hadn't spoken Howell might not have recognized her at first.

"No, I'm not fond baby sitting, but I occasionally get stuck with the job." Howell answered, taking a step closer to her. There was no one else in earshot, and it was almost as if Larrin had planned it that way. When two men came walking up the stairway, saw Larrin standing there, and quickly retreated back down the stairs, Howell knew something was up.

"Next time, think twice before inviting a team of Genii over for dinner." Larrin said icily, still leaning against the column.

"I didn't have a lot of options. I wasn't just going to leave them to die." Howell argued, folding his arms and studying her more closely. Her eyes were tired looking and her normally almost golden skin tone was pale and dirty. She looked like she hadn't slept in days.

"Family issues." Larrin said, answering his unspoken question.

"I heard about that. Peabody said your mother was part of the Traveler council; you never mentioned that before."

"There are a lot of things I didn't mention." They both stared at each other in silence before Larrin practically exploded.

"Dang it Howell!" She shoved past him and grabbed onto the rail behind him, as if preparing to throw herself over it. "Why did you do that?"

Her voice hadn't cracked and she wasn't crying, but Howell could tell she was on the verge of losing control completely. He stepped up to the rail beside her and tried to meet her gaze.

"I'm not sure what part you're referring to, so I'll just go with a general answer. I did what I had to ensure the safety of my team, and you. I thought that was the only way to get you all safely out of danger, so I took the chance. I wanted to contact you all as soon as I hit the deck of the Sun Tzu but our com systems were down. I was barely able to get off that message warning you not to blow me out of the sky when I made orbit!"

"I'm not upset with you for almost dying. I'm not upset with you for not calling me. I'm furios that you decided to pull a rescue mission and dump a team of Genii on my base! You didn't destroy the whole fleet, and now the Wraith know exactly where our defenses are and how to overcome them. You left your dinky little ship in my hangar, gave us another thirty mouths to feed, and now parade around my base like you own it! That is what I'm 'upset' about!" Larrin turned to face Howell now, standing up to her full height and glaring harshly at him.

Howell was taken completely off guard by her accusations. He didn't

know how to respond, but ended up saying something anyway.

"I'm sorry we've been a burden to you. As soon as our ship is fixed I'll take all of the survivors and my own team and leave. We'll see what we can do about the Wraith on our way out." With that, he turned and headed back for the tram, leaving Larrin to glare after him with her hand twitching above her holster.

As the tram pulled up at the 'station', or really just the platform where people and cargo departed, Howell heard the tell-tale sound of a Traveler gun being fired, and his leg went limp!

He hit the deck with a groan, the effects already shooting up his leg. He wasn't totally stunned, but his leg was numb and he was far more groggy and sluggish now.

"Now we're even." Larrin's distinctive silhouette went past him, and the tram pulled away.

Major Bane was in the Traveler command center, trying to make a new friend. It wasn't something he was good at, but for the sake of the rest of his team, he thought he'd try. Their only Traveler contact was Larrin, and she seemedâ€¦distant, lately. Bane thought it would be nice to have someone besides the tempermental captain on their side, and he was feeling left out of all the plans and projects that were going on.

He couldn't grow plants, he knew nothing about mining in frozen dirt, and he was no doctor by any means. That excluded him from a lot of jobs right there. Besides the fact that he couldn't fly a ship or weld a deck plate excluded him from most other work he might find on the base.

His standing orders were to watch out for the team of Marines, but that was either pitifully easy or impossibly hard, depending on the time. If they were all back in their assigned bunks back on board Larrin's ship, they were all in spot and too tired to do much besides play cards. If they were all working, Bacon would be showing off his farming skills in the green house, Colonel Howell would be overseeing the repairs to the Sun Tzu in the hangar, while Krag and Peabody would be working on another project with Chief Engineer Star on Larrin's ship. He didn't know much about what they were working on, but he hoped it was something more productive than what he'd been doing.

Major Bane knew nothing of farming, wasn't invited to the private party Krag seemed to have organized, and he didn't feel that watching repair crews required more than one person. So he was in the command center, chatting away non-stop with a Traveler man monitoring spy satellite feeds.

"Hello." Bane said simply. The Traveler, a man in his forties with a balding head and a somewhat round build, grunted in response.

"That looks very interesting; what is it you're doing?"

"Monitoring satellite sensor readouts. They're encrypted in binary and transmitted in data packets ranging from one to two terra-bytes per packet. Very interesting work." The man said lazily, mocking Bane a little.

"Anything interesting out there?" Bane asked, feeling completely foolish now.

"No."

They were both quiet for at least a minute before Bane threw in the towel and started to walk away. But as he did, he noticed a red indicator flashing that the Traveler hadn't seen yet.

"Excuse me, but this monitor says a satellite is detecting something." Bane pointed out, wishing he understood more of what the live feed was sending. The bored Traveler rolled his chair closer and scanned the screen with tired eyes, sighing deeply as he did so.

"False alarm. This satellite is in orbit and was recently damaged during the fight with the Wraith. Besides, it's picking up a hyper-space window from a ship no larger than a tram car. That's obviously not possible." He flipped a toggle switch and the alarm stopped flashing.

"That's no false alarm! I know this ship!" Bane said suddenly, leaning over the console.

The image was blurry, out of focus, and shaky from the damaged camera, but Bane was still sure.

"What it is then? A Wraith dart that suddenly grew a hyper-drive?" The Traveler man asked condescendingly.

"Close. It's an Ancient ship we call a 'Puddlejumper', or just Jumper for short. And I think I know where it got the hyper-drive from!" Bane reached for his radio and clicked it on as he stared at the screen.

"Colonel Howell?"

"What is it?" His speech was slurred and he sounded incredibly annoyed with Bane for some reason.

"Colonel, you'll want to see this. A Jumper just dropped out of hyper-space in orbit!"

"Told you it'd work!"

"Hey, I never doubted you!"

"In fact, you did. As did I, but I am very glad that we have made it here. Wherever 'here' is."

"Looks like a frozen rock floating in space to me."

"Look, we all saw the Sun Tzu on sensors, and it went this way. Plus, Colonel Caldwell said they were with Travelers. That's good enough for me. And stop leaning over me, Chewy, I can barely see what I'm doing!"

Ronon sat back down, still favoring his side as he did so. Teyla was beside him, staring at the planet with Colonel Sheppard. Doctor McKay



was in the back, still tinkering with the make-shift hyper-drive he'd invented before he'd almost ascended.

Sheppard tapped his radio and hoped someone would be able to hear him from up in orbit.

"This is Colonel John Sheppard of the Atlantis Expedition to any Travelers or military on the ground." He paused as he waited for a response, studying the icy surface of the planet carefully.

"I don't think anyone heard you." Ronon said with a nod, playing with his gun as he spoke.

"That's impossible, where else could theyâ€|?"

"Colonel Sheppard? It's good you hear your voice again. My name is Major Lucas Bane from Colonel Howell's team, we're currently located inside the Traveler base below the planet's surface. You should be getting coordinates for landing any second." The deep voice of Major Bane came through the radio all of a sudden, making Sheppard smile as he heard it.

"Thank you Major. We'll be down in time for dinner." Sheppard joked, turning off the radio. Teyla looked confused and shifted in her seat to get a better view of the landing site.

"I am unfamiliar with this 'Howell', have you heard of him before?" She asked Sheppard.

"It sounds vaguely familiar but I don't think I've ever met him. I also didn't know he was a Colonel." Sheppard answered, taking the Jumper into a steep dive towards the planet. Ronon forced himself to look anywhere else as they flew practically straight down, pretending to scratch his head.

"Doesn't that make like five Colonels? Do you guys have any other ranks in your military?" Ronon asked suspiciously. He glanced at Teyla, who only shrugged in response.

"Yeah, I guess soâ€| To be fair though, I was a Major until Weir pretty much ordered them to promote me. And Colonel Carter isn't in command anymore."

"Hmm. A planet full of Travelers you don't trust and a team of, what, Army, soldiers we've never heard of? Sounds fun." He pulled his gun out of it's holster and twirled it around once, as if anticipating a fight once they landed.

"Hey, there were plenty of guys that worked under me and I don't remember any of their names! It's perfectly natural for a few to have slipped by Sheppard." Rodney slipped back into the 'shotgun' chair and patted Sheppard on the back as he did so, evidently satisfied that the drive behind them was no longer in danger of exploding.

"First of all, they're Marines, from what Caldwell could find about them, and I don't think that's fair comparison. You suck at remembering people's names." Sheppard said dryly, looking over at Rodney accusingly.

"Why do I have to memorize all of the weird, hard to pronounce names of my underlings? They all know my name!" Rodney said matter-of-factly.

"It is polite, Rodney." Teyla said severely.

"Eh, whatever. We'll find out who they are soon enough." Rodney leaned back in his seat and watched as the snow covered landscape came rushing up at them before a set of hangar doors were visible.

"That structure must be very large to hold a Traveler ship. I wonder how many there are?" Teyla asked in wonder as the massive doors slid open. The Jumped flew threw and spotted a landing site nearby as the doors closed behind them.

"Wow. That's cool." Ronon looked over Sheppard's seat at their giant neighbor, one of the Traveler vessels damaged in the fighting the previous week.

"Not so cool when you're tied up inside and being beaten for information. Let's just hope that Larrin's in a good mood." Sheppard powered down the controls, grabbed his P-90, and they all made their way past the hyper-drive to get out the rear door.

As soon as Sheppard hit the tarmac, they all heard someone come running. She was going so fast they barely recognized Sheppard's tormentor when they saw her.

"Sheppard!" Larrin brushed past Ronon, no small feat in itself, and wrapped her arms around the Colonel's neck. Before he could say a word, she planted her lips on his.

Teyla and Ronon wisely stepped aside while Rodney rolled his eyes and sighed.

"Captain Kirk at his finest."

"Sheppard and his team here? I wonder why?" Major Bane asked curiously as he and Howell stood on the catwalk above. They were just high enough to see Larrin and Sheppard, and Bane gave Howell a concerned as he realized what she was doing.

"They have a mission, and so do we. With any luck, Krag, Peabody and now McKay can get the Sun Tzu ready for the trip back to Milky Way. We've about used up our welcome here." Howell said coldly.

"I hear you were shot."

"Don't ask." Howell growled.

"Colonel, are we really going back to Milky Way? All of us?" Bane suddenly asked. The same suspicious look he'd had when Howell took off onboard the hive ship came back, and Howell nodded slowly in response.

"They have their mission. I have mine."

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><p>Later that night, after the team had been shown around the Traveler base, Colonel John Sheppard was wandering the corridors alone. He was looking for someone, but according to everyone he'd talked to, the man hadn't been seen all day.<p>

Larrin had insisted on inviting Sheppard and his team to dinner aboard her ship; it was appreciated, especially by McKay, after the week of eating M.R.E.'s morning noon and night. Eventually Larrin had dramatically disappeared and McKay had fallen asleep, while Ronon and Teyla went to spar with some of the tougher Travelers from another crew.

Sheppard had wanted to talk to Colonel Howell since he'd heard Caldwell's report, and after stealing a hyper-drive component from the battle cruiser shipyards, hijacking a Jumper on its way to the Alpha-site and gating as close to the edge of the galaxy as they could, Sheppard was extremely anxious to finally talk to the man.

He was walking along a dark corridor towards another hangar, whistling to himself to try and hide his nerves. He'd always hated long walks in the dark, and Larrin's presence made him even more nervous. Just because he couldn't see her, didn't mean she couldn't see him.

But as it turned out, Larrin was the least of his worries. Sheppard suddenly froze and reached for his sidearm, his body rigid.

"Relax, Colonel, if I'd wanted to hurt you you'd be dead by now." Colonel Howell's deep voice sounded behind him, and Sheppard slowly turned around to face him. Where Howell had come from, Sheppard could only guess. The corridor was carved out of volcanic rock and ice; there were no rooms or side passages he could have snuck out of.

"Oh, very comforting." Sheppard said sarcastically, eyeing the other colonel carefully.

Howell was an inch or two taller than him, broad shouldered and powerful looking. Sheppard had no doubt that Ronon could take him in a fight, but it would take effort. And from the dark look in Howell's eye, Sheppard had the feeling Howell would have just shot Ronon from the start.

"I hate beating around the bush so I'll be blunt. Why are you and your team here?" Howell demanded, folding his arms over his Traveler style brown leather jacket. He also had the distinctive Traveler sidearm strapped to his hip; there was very little U.S. Marine left in his appearance.

"That is pretty bluntâ€¦" Sheppard agreed, nodding as he spoke. "We have a plan to hit the Wraith. Hard. So hard that they may not be able to recover."

"And you intend to carry out this plan with a Jumper and four men?" Howell asked skeptically.

"Teyla is actually a woman; I wouldn't want to make the mistake when she's in earshot." Sheppard said with a smile. But all of a sudden, he got deadly serious.

"Actually, I intend to use the Sun Tzu and any Traveler ships we can muster up as well. But I was planning on detailing all of this to everyone tomorrow. Maybe you and your team can attend the meeting."

Both men were quiet for a long minute, each staring at the other as if waiting for some signal. Finally, Howell broke the silence.

"Just go on and ask already." Howell challenged, taking a step closer to him.

"Alright. How do you keep your hair like that? My barber's back at Atlantis and Iâ€¦"

"Be serious, for just five minutes, and you can go back to being you're normal self afterwards." Howell snapped. Sheppard straightened up and dropped his half smile, starting to get angry now.

"Fine, have it your way. Who are you and how are you still here?"

"My name is Colonel John Howell, formerly of the United States Marine Corps." Howell replied, still slowly approaching Sheppard.

"Nice name. But 'formerly'? No, once a Marine, always a Marine?"

"No." Howell stopped walking and stared Sheppard in the eye, now only a few feet from him.

"Colonel, the short answer to his whole scenario is for you to take your team and finish your mission. Then load up anyone else ready to leave, and fly home on the Sun Tzu. You get to live, so do countless other civilians, and both of our missions are completed." Howell put everything he had into that short burst of conversation. If ever he was going to intimidate someone into following his orders, it would be right then.

Unfortunately, he wasn't telling McKay to give up the sandwich, he was telling Sheppard to back off. It only took him a second to realize that it wasn't going to work.

"And what about you? What is your mission?" Sheppard demanded, folding his arms and cocking his head.

"Let's see, you were transferred to my base less than a year ago. You and your team have been totally off of my Radar ever since, but have obviously been working behind the scenes since you got here. When

Atlantis took off, you and your team were left behind. And somehow you've not only survived, but managed to destroy, what was the final count?" Sheppard paused, making a show of counting on his fingers.

"Two hives and three cruisers. Not bad for someone I've never heard of before." He dropped his hand dangerously close to his sidearm again and stared back at Howell. "Colonel Howell, I don't like secrets and I'm starting to dislike you. So how about we cut the crap and you just tell me what's going on?"

His voice echoed down the long corridor, making an eerie sound as it bounced back to them. Howell snorted in derision and shook his head, looking utterly fed up with the other man.

"I'm starting to see why the I.O.A. doesn't like you. You don't play ball, even when it's in your best interest." Howell looked Sheppard up and down, honestly considering just killing him right there. Sheppard must have caught the look because he stepped farther back and grew even tenser.

"Did you ever hear of Operation Valkerie? Back in World War II the Germans knew that Hitler's assassination was more than likely, it was probable. So they designed a system that would go into action if ever Hitler was taken out of the picture. His lieutenants would assume command and hopefully bring the Nazis to victory, despite the death of their leader."

"My great grandfather fought the Nazis in Germany. I can't stand their ideology any more than you can, Colonel, but even you have to admit that Operation Valkerie had its merits. Well, the I.O.A. thought so anyway."

"My mission was, and is, to evacuate the base of Atlantis and all its surrounding outposts if ever an emergency arose. Once all civilians and personnel of the base were back in the safety of Milky Way, I would then do my best to neutralize any remaining threats to the people of Earth." Howell admitted, feeling strange as he told this stranger a secret he'd kept for five years.

"And how on Earth did you get roped into that gig?" Sheppard asked, the connections starting to form in his head.

"I was recruited early, when I was just a Major fresh off of Earth. My team was sent to engage enemy forces under the command of Anubis. My entire team was taken out within five minutes. I alone was able to destroy a mother-ship containing hundreds of the things before barely making it out of the ship alive. Two days later, they found me in the burning rubble and brought me back to the SG-C. I was patched up, prematurely promoted, and given a new mission."

"I was to gather and train the best of the best in an attempt to form a Valkerie protocol. Originally, I was to be sent through with the rest of the Atlantis Expedition when they first dialed in, but Weir somehow got word of it and requested a new officer, Colonel Sumner, be sent in my place. Since the I.O.A. didn't yet have the authority to override her, I was put on the back burner."

"When I did finally make it here aboard the Daedalus, I had my mission and was well on the way to assembling my team. If you or

Woolsey ever slipped up in your duties, I would be there to pick up the pieces. I've been acquiring knowledge, resources and allies for the past year to use in case of emergency. An emergency like, say, you dieing in a fiery crash after piloting half of a hive ship into the atmosphere?" Howell asked, almost casually.

"Or Mr. Woolsey being executed after going off world to 'negotiate' with known enemies of this expedition. Or, and I'm just spit-balling here, if you decided to have another affair with an attractive alien woman that used you to invade and destroy our base of operations!" Howell was shouting now, and came nose to nose with Sheppard.

"My mission was always to be there when you cracked. The I.O.A. needed a man who was high ranking enough to command respect after a catastrophe, but not so high profile that you'd ask too many questions. Colonel seemed to fit, so my handler did the paperwork and wrote the check. You wanted to know who I was and what I wanted? Now you do. When you and every other member of the Atlantis Expedition are safely home and accounted for, I will personally exterminate the Wraith and any other enemies capable of attacking Earth. I will finish the mission, and I will clean up your mess."

Howell was practically out of breath after his speech. It was rare that he spoke to anyone for so long and his voice was starting to get hoarse. He had been sworn to secrecy about everything he'd just revealed, but then again, who was Sheppard going to tell? With any luck, he'd run off another suicide mission and the odds would finally catch up to him.

Sheppard was taken aback at what the other colonel had admitted to. As soon as he had processed it, or at least attempted to, one last question was still in the forefront of his thoughts.

"You were going to be left behind in Pegasus? Alone, fighting against the Wraith?"

All of Howell's steam was gone. His shoulders sagged and his eyes suddenly seemed much older as he answered.

"I have always been alone. My family left me for dead when I was fifteen. The Marines shoved me off on the SG-C after I failed to kiss the right butts and the play the right games. I was abandoned by my team when they thought the odds of escaping were better without me. Being alone is nothing new for me." Howell looked back at the icy walls around them, reflecting on the horrible circumstances of his past. He'd never pitied himself, and he'd never wanted any one else's. He was who he was, and he would do what he had to. There was no other way to look at it in his mind.

"To be fair, I wasn't quite alone. I chose the members of my team for a reason; I won't be able to do this without them. With the Travelers and hopefully the Genii on our side, we have a shot at stopping the Wraith." Howell turned back to look at Sheppard, his face unreadable.

"But you and your team don't fit into this picture. You're impetuous, arrogant, and foolhardy. How you've survived this long is mystery both to me and to my I.O.A. superiors. So finish your mission, and go. I'll hold the line, I'll finish the war, and I'll cover your tracks. You get to go home and be the hero."

"You think that's what I've been doing back on Earth? Playing the hero?" Sheppard demanded, narrowing his eyes as he spoke.

"You've always been the hero, Sheppard. You were born for it. Now go, play the hero, and go home. This isn't a war for heroes and villains. This is a war of survivors and casualties. And I do not want any more casualties on my hands."

Both men stared at each other, ready to slug it out right there. Howell didn't like Sheppard. He never had been fond of the man, and now it was all coming out. He'd meant everything he'd said; he wasn't the type to get flustered and say things he didn't mean. But as he saw the change in Sheppard's eyes, he realized he might have gone too far.

"I have always done what I thought was right, and done my best to protect my people. If that meant starting a war with an alien race, fine. If it meant blowing up a planet, fine! But I would do whatever I had to! Sounds to me like we aren't so different after all."

Before Howell could respond, Sheppard's radio buzzed to life, starting both of them.

"Sheppard? Where are you? You didn't get lost again, did you?" Larrin's voice was almost playful; it was a side of her Howell had never seen before. Sheppard actually blushed as she spoke, looking down at his feet before responding.

"No, Larrin, I'm justâ€¦ taking the scenic route."

"Well hurry up. I want to show you something up at Hangar Five." The radio died and Sheppard tucked it back into his vest.

"We're more different than you know, Sheppard." Howell's voice sounded almost pained, like he'd just taken a fist to the gut. He walked past Sheppard and didn't look back, his boots crunching on the gravel and ice. He finally disappeared into the darkness while Sheppard watched, even more perplexed by the man than he'd been before.

## 16. Easy as Pie

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**><p>**When the Travelers built their base, which had actually yet to be named, they didn't think they'd need any large meeting chambers. They're governing style was reminiscent of the Articles of Confederation; powerful states or collections of people would have

control over themselves, and only meet together when outside forces threatened them all. When most of your nation is made up of crews onboard starships, each on traveling farther and farther away from the main group, it's the only real way <em>to</em> govern. So large, dramatic, centralized places for people to meet and discuss issues weren't needed.

That is, until Howell's team arrived. Now, all five council members, all nine ship captains, five Marines, two scientists, an Air Force Colonel, and two 'civilians', though the term didn't quite sit right with anyone who knew them, all had to huddle together in a hangar to discuss the developments of the day. Work crews tried to politely avoid the group, but there was no denying that every word said there would be spread around to each and every person on the base. Normally the Travelers didn't rely on secrecy when it came to the governing of their people, but things were rapidly changing.

"Alright, it looks like everyone's here. Might as well get started." Sheppard smiled in a friendly way at each of the people gathered around him; only a few returned the smile.

"Yala's not here?" Major Bacon asked Howell quietly.

"Stunned and tied up in her quarters." Howell whispered back. Bacon grunted in surprise.

"Her people were okay with that?"

"Her people suggested it."

"I bet you're all wondering why I've gathered you here todayâ€¦" Sheppard went on, apparently oblivious to Howell and Bacon's whispered conversation. Before he could go any farther, Captain Larrin's mother spoke up sharply.

"We certainly are."

"â€¦well then, I won't keep you waiting in suspense. My team and I came here from the Milky Way galaxy. We came here on a Jumper, which was recently upgraded with a hyper-drive."

"A hyper-drive I invented, from scratch, I might add!" McKay put in, smiling proudly. Sheppard nodded in an annoyed way and went on.

"Yes, yes you did, and you only had to steal six different parts from two different facilities to get it working."

"Well, to be fair, it was an incredibly complicatedâ€¦"

"In any case, we got here." The look on Sheppard's face silenced McKay, finally, and he started again.

"The reason we came here is simple. We have a Wraith prisoner in Atlantis that recently gave us some intel. He's not exactly trustworthy, but I think he's telling the truth this time. And according to Todd, our pet Wraith, there is a planet in this galaxy where every Wraith queen \_in\_ the galaxy will be together. Some kind of annual meeting to discuss evil deeds and such." Sheppard explained. He purposely avoided Howell's gaze, which only amused the



larger man.

"When these queens meet, they will be discussing the extermination of every advanced human civilization in Pegasus. Obviously we don't want this to happen. So, my team will take the battle cruiser Sun Tzu, which I will be renaming as soon as possible" He shook his head after having to try twice to pronounce the name correctly. Bacon mouthed the word 'finally' and looked at Sheppard like he was a genius.

"..and we will hit this meeting place with everything we have. According to Todd, there will only be a few ships in orbit to protect against other Wraith who weren't invited to the party. Like Todd. Apparently he was pretty pissy about it and they beefed up security."

"So you plan on buzzing the facility and beaming down a nuke?" Larrin asked, leaning against a large stack of crates.

"Not quite. Wraith ships have been using a jamming code for years that prevents us from beaming nukes onboard. According to Todd, it's standard issue on all ground bases as well."

"So what is this grand plan of yours?" Larrin's mother asked suspiciously. Sheppard unconsciously looked back and forth between daughter and mother a few times, as if comparing them before he answered.

"We take as many ships as we can and bombard the building from orbit. The" He paused for a minute to think before a proverbial light bulb appeared over his head. "..Enterprise, yeah, we'll go with that; will handle any Wraith ships in orbit while your own ships will fire on the ground. We go in, shoot some Wraith, and get out before reinforcements arrive. Easy as pie." Sheppard said grandly, smiling like a kid in a candy store. Ronon raised his hand comically.

"I like both of those things, for the record."

"Speaking of Chewy and Zena, only McKay and myself will be going on this mission. Teyla has been away from her son for way too long and Ronon is still injured and will \_not\_ be coming." Sheppard had to look Ronon in the eye and say the last part very forcibly to stop him from arguing.

"We'll drop them and anyone else who wants out off at the nearest gate before we get to the planet. Todd says that the meeting will last for days; we'll have plenty of time."

"You seem to be relying heavily, if not entirely, on information provided by a \_Wraith\_! Do you really expect us to waste ships and resources on this plan of yours?" Larrin's mother demanded, looking flabbergasted at the idea.

"Todd was left out of the meeting and is feeling peeved. He gave me the information so that I could kill \_his\_ enemies while he sits back and watches. Sort of. He'd have no reason to lie." Sheppard argued.

"There are a lot of unknown variables with this plan." Bane put in, speaking for the first time. Sheppard nodded held his hands out,

acknowledging the point.

"Fair enough, but since when do we have all the details? We have a shot at hitting the Wraith so hard they won't be able to recover! No queens means no more baby Wraith, which means no more troops! We'd have a shot at winning this war!" Sheppard said enthusiastically, trying to appeal to their predatory side. But as he was speaking, a very angry looking Yala got off of the elevator behind them, followed by the rest of the Genii team.

"Why wasn't I invited to this meeting?" Yala demanded, putting her hands on her hips dramatically. Howell groaned and stepped forward to stand between her and the rest of the group.

"You know why. Calm down and play nicely." He said politely, but with a furious tone to his voice.

"I'm not talking to you. You pissed me off." She threw a long length of now frayed ropes at his feet before walking boldly to the center of the crowd. Another Genii, a man only a few years older than Howell, gave him an apologetic shrug and dutifully followed after the girl.

"I've been listening in on the com link I planted on Bacon, and I think this is a terrible plan." Yala stated in an almost bored tone. Bacon stiffened up and blushed hard, patting himself down as he walked away from the group.

"How shocking. The Genii brat doesn't play well with others." Larrin snapped, stepping up to the girl. Yala laughed in a painfully high tone and pushed her back with her fingertips.

"Look who's talking!" Before Larrin could say another word, or shoot her, Yala went on.

"I've set plenty of ambushes before and I've walked into more than a few set by Wraith. And I'm telling you, this couldn't possibly be better set up. The Wraith just lost big time and now they're ready for a rematch! We send in all of our ships, they move in another fleet of hives, and a few explosions later we're out a dozen ships."

The mood of the room shifted dramatically. Sheppard had a way of inspiring people; Yala had way of ticking them off; added to the fact that she had a good point.

"Well, maybe it's a trap, maybe it's not. Even if we only get a few shots off, even if we only kill a few queens, we have to try! We may never get a chance like this again!" Sheppard argued, wisely keeping his distance from the Genii girl.

People whispered amongst themselves, but the only people whose opinion really mattered were silent. The five council members all looked thoughtful before turning their gaze to Larrin's mother.

"Excuse me!" She said loudly. The conversations died off immediately, and even Yala was respectfully quiet. Howell flashing his gun at her from behind Bane and Krag helped her behavior.

"I agree that this is a risky plan," Councilwoman Larrin stated dryly, looking at Yala harshly. "but I also think this is too good an opportunity to pass up. If my fellow council members agree, I vote we move forward at once." None of the other councilmember seemed foolish enough to disagree, and Sheppard lit up.

"Good enough for me. Point us towards the Wraith, Sheppard, and we'll take care of the rest!" Larrin leaned on his shoulder with one arm, smiling predatorily up at him. He gave her an awkward smile and gently moved her arm off before taking a step back, looking like a frightened rabbit the whole time.

"You don't think this is a good idea, do you?" Bane asked Howell as they rode the tram back to Larrin's hangar. Howell shook his head slowly.

"I think it's a terrible plan. But Sheppard has them convinced he can pull it off, so our opinions don't matter much. If he wants to go off on a wild goose chase, let him. We'll pick up the pieces when he's done."

"I hear that Larrin is taking over another Traveler's ship and Captain Katana Labrea is staying behind with the crippled vessel."

Howell didn't respond, but looked thoughtful. As the tram stopped, Bane put his hand on the door to keep it closed.

"You and Colonel Sheppard spoke earlier today." It wasn't so much a question as a statement, though Howell had no idea how he knew.

"Yes we did."

"I can't imagine what it was about,"

"Liar."

"but I hope it won't cloud your judgment about this plan of his. I understand none of us are accompanying him on the 'Enterprise'."

"Nothing will cloud will my judgment when it comes to our mission." Howell stated forcefully. "And it's name is the Sun Tzu. If Sheppard wants to take the ship, he can round up a crew himself. I won't risk any of our people on a suicide mission."

"If we went, it might not be so hopeless." Bane folded his arms and let the doors to the tram open, still eyeing Howell accusingly.

"Our presence won't affect it one way or the other. And I have other plans that do involve you and the rest of the team. I only hope Sheppard brings the Sun Tzu back in one piece; she's a valuable asset that will be hard to replace."

Bane shook his head, shocked at Howell's phrasing. "Yes, it would be a shame to lose the ship."

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><p>"It's so much more quiet and peaceful with Yala goneâ€|" Bacon mused to himself, lying on his assigned bunk in the hangar complex. Bane only grunted from the bed above him.<p>

"It's like a sudden cloud has rolled awayâ€|" Bacon went on. He was on the bottom bed of the bunk bed, playing with his Traveler style and rambling on. Bane was above him, reading one of the few books the Travelers had kept. Most of what was worth reading was in the computer database, but Bane had borrowed the old-style book from another man who slept in the room.

"Or like an annoying child has finally fallen asleepâ€|"

"Bacon, she's half your age. And she's gone." Bane turned the page on his book nonchalantly and kept reading.

"What? I know that! I didn't meanâ€|"

"Liar." Bane accused. He sighed to himself that he'd accidentally chosen the bed above Bacon's. There were no other empty beds when everyone was asleep at night, and it would seem odd if he asked someone to trade.

"She's not half my age! She's two thirds! I know math!" Bacon pouted. He tucked his gun back into it's holster and folded his hands, still not done with the mostly one-sided conversation.

"I guess it don't matter. She ain't comin' back anyway."

"Major Bacon." Bane snapped his book shut and leaned over the side of the bed to look at the man below him. "We are currently stranded on an alien base in another galaxy and our only foreseeable way home was just flown into battle against our commanding officer's advice. A twenty five year old spy for an enemy nation is not your biggest worry!"

Bacon huffed and purposely looked away from Bane. "Well, forgive me for lookin'!"

"Good, you're both here." Colonel Howell walked into the otherwise empty bunkroom and nodded to Bane and Bacon. They both hit the floor and stood at attention as Krag and Peabody followed Howell into the room.

As soon as his team was inside, Howell shut and locked the airtight door and turned off his radio.

"As you all know, one hour ago exactly the Sun Tzu and eight other Traveler vessels lifted off and jumped to hyper-space. Aboard the Sun

Tzu was Colonel Sheppard's team, as well as the Genii team. Teyla, Ronon and the Genii will be dropped off at the closest Stargate." Howell reported, hands folded behind his back.

"The other civilians rescued from the hive ship have elected to stay and join the Travelers; they claim that there wasn't anything to go back to after this alliance culled their world. That is their choice to make."

The way Howell said, all four of his men knew that they wouldn't be making the same choice.

"As of this minute, we are stranded on this base. That will not be the case for long, however." Howell smiled a little as he spoke, and pulled out a flash drive from his pants' pocket.

"Copied onto this drive is all of the intelligence that Yala's team has been stealing for the past week. Besides it are all of the mission reports from all Atlantis teams for the past five years. With this flash drive we will be engaging in Phase Two of Operation Valkerie."

Howell spoke with a clear and distinct voice, like all of that had been a speech he'd been practicing. There was a certain fire in his eyes that Bane knew all too well; it meant that bad things were about to happen.

"For those of you who are not fully aware of Operation Valkeries' goals, I'll give you the summary." Howell looked at Peabody specifically as he spoke; he alone hadn't heard much of the Colonel's master plan.

"Phase one of the operation was the evacuation of all Atlantis personnel from the Pegasus Galaxy. That has obviously been achieved; Atlantis itself is no longer here. The only civilian left in this galaxy is Doctor McKay, and he follows Colonel Sheppard's orders. Teyla Emmagan and Ronon Dex are natives of this galaxy and do not fall under our jurisdiction. Neither does Colonel Sheppard himself, who follows his own orders." Howell said darkly.

"Phase two is simple; we will establish a base of operations and begin the total and utter annihilation of the Wraith empire. I have been authorized to commit Genocide for the duration of this mission."

He let the weight of those words sink in to his men. Genocide was no light matter; there would be no going back or changing of policy; when Colonel Howell's team was down, the Wraith would no longer exist. Period.

"Before I go any farther, I have to ask. Do any of you want out of this mission?" Howell asked sincerely. Bane alone had been in it from the start; he didn't know for sure if any of the others would \_want\_ to go through with Valkerie.

"Killing Wraith and saving lives? Sign me up." Bacon said matter-of-factly. Howell frowned and shook his head.

"Not that simple. If you all agree to this, there will be no going back. No retreat. No surrender. If we see the opportunity to go home,

we will not be able to take it. Now that I know we are the last members of the Expedition in this galaxy, I must continue on with the mission. Up until this point my goal has been getting you all home; giving you the choice of having a decent life. If you decide to stay, that choice will be forfeit."

Howell's eyes narrowed and stepped forward, trying to show how sincere he was. "We will be hunters until there is nothing left to hunt."

"I have no family back home." Krag said unexpectedly. "My parents died when I was eighteen. My only friends are in this room. I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. I'm with you, Colonel."

Howell nodded solemnly and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. He was in his twenties, sure, but he still resembled a boy, far from home. His blonde hair had grown out, as well as a beard and mustache, but he still looked all of sixteen.

"Well, I left my old stomping grounds looking for an adventure. It does appear I've found one!" Peabody said with a wry smile. "I'm with you as well."

Peabody had changed too. His bad sunburn had turned into a somewhat healthy tan, his own hair and beard had grown out longer than Krag's, and he somehow looked tougher. With more meat on his bones, and less of a librarian aura about him. Howell was glad that he'd chosen Peabody for the team; he was an invaluable asset.

"I've been with you from the beginning, sir. I'll be here until the end." Bane said quietly. His eyes were set on Howell and his body rigid as he stood with his companions. Howell had no doubt that without the man, he wouldn't have gotten half as far along on his mission.

"Well, I already said. I'm in! Now let's throw our hands up in the air and shout 'woo hoo' and get it over with!" Bacon suggested, flashing a toothy grin Howell's way.

It occurred to Howell that he was waiting for someone else to speak, and it hit him in the gut when he remembered who. Major Jones. The Travelers had given him a decent burial in an underground chamber, burying his metal coffin in the soft silt of a dry subterranean riverbed. Jones had always been there; he and Bacon had come onto Howell's team together. He was always laughing and joking with Bacon; there were no serious moments. Plus, the kid could deal cards like a casino owner.

"Jones would have been in too." Bacon said morosely, as if he were reading Howell's mind.

They were all silent as they thought about the man they'd lost. He was the first casualty, and somehow, Howell didn't think he'd be the last. Doctor Jackson could come back from the dead. Sheppard could run a suicide mission every week and be fine. Ronon could fight an army with a tooth pick and a plastic fork and win. But Jones— He was human. He was real. He was that kid you knew on your block who always got in trouble and hung out with the cool crowd. He was the guy that dated the girl you liked and you weren't mad at him for it.

He could lighten the mood in a funeral home with one word.

Sadly, he wasn't there to lift their spirits as they remembered him.

"For Bret Jones." Bacon said suddenly.

"For Jones." They all echoed.

"Now that we're agreed, we have work to do." Howell forced himself to get back to the mission at hand.

"First things first; we need a way off of this world. Krag, Peabody, I understand that Larrin and a woman named Katana Labrea traded ships before the fleet left." Howell asked, turning to the two in question.

"Yes sir. Unfortunately, Captain Katana's new ship is still in pieces. She's not going anywhere anytime soon." Krag admitted miserably. Howell knew how many hours he, Peabody and Star had put into those engines.

"That's alright Captain. Yala actually found our answer before she and her team were forced to leave." Howell said with a cat like smile. He walked up to the computer embedded in one wall of the bunkroom and inserted his flash drive into an adapter from another pocket, and inserted that into the computer's port.

"The adapter you made works perfectly, Peabody." Howell mentioned as he pulled up the right file. Peabody only nodded slightly in response.

"We were told that when the Attero device destroyed a Stargate and the first Traveler colony in generations, the people of the Traveler nation forsook gate travel altogether. We were lied to." Howell pulled up a map of the solar system they were in and pointed to a gas giant on the outer edge.

"Circling this giant is a moon, and circling that moon is a space gate. Very, very few Travelers know of it's existence; it took Yala six days to find out about it. Don't ask how." Howell warned.

"But with all due respect, sir, we still can't there. And even if we could just teleport ourselves out there, which we can't, we still wouldn't have a DHD!" Krag argued, uncharacteristically blunt. The past few weeks had changed him a lot.

"That's why I was so excited when I saw Colonel Sheppard's Jumper." Howell explained.

"Yes, we could all tell you were overjoyed and completely overcome with emotion." Bane said sarcastically. Howell smirked at his friend, but kept going.

"Unfortunately, Sheppard took it with him when he left with the Traveler fleet. I was starting to get worried until I came across this." Howell brought up another map, this time of something much closer.

"Is that another hangar?" Bacon asked incredulously.

"Yes, yes it is. And it's far too small for a Traveler ship. It took some truly amazing code breaking, but Yala was able to ascertain that the hangar was built as soon as the Travelers made landfall on this planet. Inside is another Ancient vessel that they found crashed in the ice."

"But that's too small for an Aurora class ship." Bane observed, studying the image carefully.

"I know. According to the descriptions of the scientists working on it, the ship they found was a Jumper. It spent tens of thousands of years buried in the ice after crash landing here. It's out of drones, one engine is barely functional after extensive repairs, and they had no clue to look for the cloaking capability, which may or may not be functional." Howell admitted. "But it's a Jumper."

"Jones was our pilot." Bacon reminded him. Howell nodded soberly at the thought.

"But I also have the ATA gene. So does Peabody, but I assume you've had even less training flying Jumpers than I have?" Howell asked.

"I flew in that ill-conceived mission with Colonel Sheppard to blast our way through an asteroid field the year we lost poor Doctor Weir. But I was not overly good with the thing, no." Peabody admitted with a frown.

"No problem. I'm no ace pilot but I can manage it."

Howell took the drive out of the computer after letting them all study the maze of tunnels and corridors leading to the secret hangar. They all put their weapons on stun before Peabody asked the obvious question.

"Are we now enemies of the Travelers?"

"To a point. They were useful before, but that usefulness has ended. Sheppard and Larrin are off on a half-cocked plan to wipe out the Wraith; if they succeed, our job will be easier but not done. I anticipate that he at least will be going back to the Milky Way galaxy as soon as he's done here." Howell predicted.

"But we need to use that gate, and we can't count on Sheppard or his team to help us. I purposely did not want us on the Sun Tzu when it lifted off because I didn't want anyone to know we were leaving. If this is going to work in the long run, the less people know about us, the better." Howell said firmly as he tucked his gun away again.

"So that's it? We go out on our own to slaughter the Wraith with no home, no allies, and precious little ammunition?" Peabody asked, suddenly regretting his earlier gung-ho attitude.

"Not quite. I have that planned out too. The Ancients were downright lazy when it came to reclaiming old technology; we'll use that to our advantage. For now, we're not welcome on this base and this our only way out. We're taking it."

Two minutes later, Howell's team was moving as quickly and quietly through the base as they could. Most of the Travelers were with the



fleet now, and the corridors they came across were deserted. Ground personnel and Katana Labrea's crew were the only ones left.

"Forgive me for asking, sir, but I feel I have to." Bane said hesitantly as they ran. He and Howell were in the lead with rest of the team close behind them.

"What is it?"

"Did your relationship with Captain Larrin affect your judgment call on leaving the base so soon?"

Howell forced himself to keep running at the same pace, but his face blushed heavily and he shot a dangerous look Bane's way.

"I don't have any relationship with Larrin. She was useful for a time, and now she's not. That's all there is to it. She told me personally that we were not welcome here, and I don't trust Sheppard with our dirty laundry, let alone our lives. I knew we'd have to do this from day one." Howell answered firmly.

"Yes sir." Bane drifted back just enough to break off the conversation as they came to the first door.

It was a large, metal sliding door that covered the entire corridor, which was impressive in itself. The walls had to be thirty feet from one end to the other.

"I'll have us through in no time!" Peabody slid the last foot or so on his knees and started typing away on the control panel nearby.

"It's open." Krag said, obviously surprised. They all watched as he effortlessly opened the massive door, which slid in two pieces into the wall. Peabody looked immensely disappointed, and slowly climbed to his feet.

"I thought you said this was off limits to most Traveler personnel?" Bane asked, taking out his weapon.

Howell followed suit and pulled out a flashlight. "It is. Watch yourselves." He led the way as the five slowly proceeded down the dark corridor.

There had been lights above them that illuminated the ice and rock tunnel fairly well; these disappeared when they cleared the door. Beyond was an uphill climb in almost total darkness.

It took another five minutes to finally reach the top of the slope, the last few yards being almost vertical. They took the climb at a fast jog, anxious to reach their destination before they were caught. As they did, another large door loomed ahead.

"Is it?" Peabody gasped, leaning on the wall as they stopped. Krag gave a much smaller, person sized door a gentle nudge, and it creaked open as well. He nodded and leveled his weapon.

"Alright, we go in together. Stay alert; someone's expecting us. We haven't officially done anything wrong yet, but stealing the only serviceable ship on the planet is bound to make us a few enemies."

Howell warned. He led the way through the darkened door, and they all burst into the next room with weapons raised.

All at once, the lights in the small hangar turned on, and two women were startled as they saw the team of Marines enter. One was armed, while the other held up a wrench menacingly.

"What's going on here? Who are you?" The older woman demanded.

"You must be Captain Labrea." Howell said in a tired tone.

They were all still pointing their weapons at each other, and Howell was reminded of how he'd met Larrin.

"Lower your weapons. All of you." Howell ordered. The teenage girl dropped her wrench and sat back down on a crate, while the Traveler captain slowly lowered her gun with the rest of them.

"What are you doing here?" Howell asked as soon his gun was holstered. Labrea snorted and looked him up and down as if she were thinking of fighting him.

"I was about to ask you the same question."

"I asked you first." Howell admitted to himself that it wasn't his best comeback, but he was anxious to take the ship behind her and go. He was still rolling around the idea of just stunning her and the kid both when she answered him.

"Captain Larrin and Colonel Sheppard are in trouble. This ship is the only thing that can help them."

## 18. A Mild Inconvenience

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\* \* \*

><p>"When <em>isn't<em> Colonel Sheppard in trouble?" Howell asked sarcastically, folding his arms and glaring at the Captain.

"This is serious." Labrea insisted, looking to each one of Howell's men in turn. When she was met only by cold stares, she looked even more nervous.

"About ten minutes ago one of our spy satellites picked up a \_fleet\_ of Wraith hives, bigger and stronger than the one that attacked us here, heading right for the meeting place Sheppard told us about. They'll intercept our own fleet in five hours." Labrea explained, standing protectively in front of Mila, the teenaged engineer.

"So call them and warn them." Bacon said lazily.

"If we do that, we risk alerting the Wraith to their position! We can't take the risk of sending any kind of transmission, so Mila and I are taking this ship and gating close enough to send a short range transmission. The Wraith still might pick it up, but there's less of a chance this way." Labrea didn't look like someone who was easily intimidated, but the sudden appearance of Howell's team had obviously caught her off guard. Mila looked totally unconcerned, and kept staring at Krag.

"Why are you here?" Labrea finally asked, staring straight at Howell.

"We need this ship too. It's been brought to my attention that we're no longer welcome. Sheppard stole our ride, and we prefer to work alone. Yala spied on you and we spied on her, which led us here." Howell summed up simply.

"That would be fine, if you were in charge here. But this is a Traveler hangar housing a Traveler ship." Labrea said firmly.

"\_That\_ would be fine, if you were in any position to give orders. But this is a team of Marines looking at two women, one of whom is armed. Not to mention the fact that without the ATA gene, you can't even turn this thing on." Howell shot back, mimicking her tone of voice to a 'T'.

"I guess we're stuck, then." Labrea growled. Her hand started drifting closer and closer to her weapon, and Howell was preparing to draw his own, when Mila spoke up.

"Star's right. You are cute."

Her childish tone of voice and innocent way speaking caught them all off guard. Krag blushed, but didn't dare take his eyes off of Labrea. Slowly, Bacon started laughing contagiously.

"You hear that, Krag? The kid thinks you're cute!" Bacon roared, slapping the embarrassed Marine on the back. He shot Bacon a dangerous look, who kept right on laughing.

Bane and Peabody both relaxed, and Mila had never been tense or agitated. Finally, Labrea and Howell bowed to the peer pressure and took their hands off of their guns.

"Sir, maybe we could make two trips?" Bane suggested carefully.

"There's plenty of room for everyone." Mila pointed out, still staring strangely at Krag.

All seven of the men and women slowly drifted inside of the damaged Jumper, with Labrea and Howell in the front of the group, talking in low tones.

"Where'd you find it?" Howell demanded, looking critically at the rusty and patched interior of the little ship.

"Buried in the ice with a desiccated Lantian pilot inside. He'd been

running from the Wraith and crashed here. We've been trying to repair it since we found it." Labrea answered, sitting down in the 'shotgun' seat.

"How well did that go?" Howell asked, tripping over a bundle of exposed wires as he took the pilot's seat.

"Pretty well." Mila chimed in from the back compartment. "But we're out of drones, the inner door here is jammed, and the starboard drive pod is acting up. That's why I'm here." She explained casually, opening up the control board as she spoke. A tray of white crystals was exposed, and she pulled out a set of pliers and a tablet from a box nearby.

"Lovely." Howell said under his breath. He turned to the controls and pressed his palm to the metal, concentrating hard to get the controls to respond. Eventually, they did.

"Is this your first time flying one of these?" Labrea asked suspiciously, looking Howell up and down as she did.

"No. But last time I was just cloaking it and hovering above the ground." Howell ground out, playing with the controls to see what still worked.

"Oh yeah, that's broke too. The cloak, I mean." Mila said from the back. The rest of the team was with her, sitting on the cracked leather benches and looking nervous.

"Anything else I should know about?" Howell asked, glancing back at the blonde girl behind him.

"Umâ€¦ Yeah, the thrusters are kind of twitchy, be careful lifting off and setting down."

"Great. This ought to be fun." Howell watched as the hangar bay doors opened in front of them after some command from Labrea's wristband, and he slowly eased the ship forward.

"Any chance of us moving faster?" Labrea asked as they crawled forward at a snail's pace.

"I'm basically flooring it. This is as fast as we can go inside the bay." Howell said through gritted teeth. His ATA gene therapy hadn't taken well, and he had to use all of his concentration to merely keep the controls activated. Moving forward was pushing the limits of his ability.

"Here, try it now!" Mila shouted.

The entire ship jumped forward and cleared the threshold of the hangar, throwing all of the passengers inside backwards. Mila slid on her rear down the length of the ship and hit the ramp, while Labrea was thrown out of her chair.

"Sorry! Inertial dampeners are broken too!" Mila said predictably. Krag helped her up, and they all adjusted to the crazy angle they were flying at.

"And my chairâ€¦" Captain Labrea picked herself up from the floor,

holding her left arm and sliding a new chair over to the front of the ship. The other had literally snapped in half with the sudden thrust forward.

"We're moving faster now." Howell managed to say, beads of sweat appearing on his forehead.

"I noticed!" Labrea finally managed to right herself and stared out the cracked windshield at the snowy world below them.

"The gate is at the edge of the solar system; it'll take a while to get there."

"I figured." Howell snapped, still rigid from exertion. As they climbed, the atmosphere got thinner and thinner before finally disappearing altogether into black space.

"There!" Howell exclaimed, leaning back from the controls. He'd brought up the HUD, set in a course, and watched as they zoomed off into the void.

"I don't understand, what did you do?" Labrea asked, studying the controls carefully.

"Basic physics; we have as much momentum as we need to get where we're going, so there's no need to strain the engines any harder. I'll make corrections as we they're needed." Howell said, shaking out his hands to restore the circulation.

"That's not how Sheppard trained us to fly Jumpers." Bane noted, sticking his head into the forward section.

"Sheppard doesn't know everything. And if he were here he'd be welcome to take the controls and fly it himself. I'm just glad we got off the ground." Howell answered.

"Jones was our pilot." Howell said after a minute, answering Labrea's unspoken question. "And we lost him in the ground battle over Larrin's ship."

"I heard about that. I'm sorry."

They were all quiet for a while, before Mila started questioning Krag about him and Star. Howell tuned them out, choosing to concentrate on the space ahead of them instead.

"You didn't put up much of a fight back in the hangar." Howell observed, looking sideways at Captain Labrea.

"We didn't have time to waste, and I figured we could argue on the way."

"We'll deliver the message that Sheppard needs to turn back, and hopefully drop you and Mila off while we're there. After that my team is taking this ship to a habitable planet with a gate, and we'll figure out how to send this thing back afterwards." Howell said it as firmly as he could, fully believing it was going to happen.

"That's cute. You'll drop me and Mila and off and do what you want with our ship. You almost sounded serious there, John."

Howell stiffened at the use of his first name, and turned slowly to face her. "Don't ever call me that again. And yes, I was serious. I need my team on a world with a gate. We need this ship to do that."

"Why couldn't you hitch a ride with Sheppard on the Enterprise? And you can call me Katana, if that helps." She said patronizingly.

"I don't trust Sheppard and I knew this ship was here. You deciding to come along at the last minute wasâ€¦ inconvenient."

"Sorry to 'inconvenience' you." Katana shot back.

"My team works alone. We do what we have to do. In our position, you'd have done the same." Howell argued. Katana looked amused as she shook her head.

"No, I really wouldn't have. I trust my people and they trust me!"

"And yet the existence of this ship and the gate we're about to go through is kept a secret from the general population." Howell said icily.

Katana pursed her lips and nodded slowly. "Fair enough."

Again, they were all quiet for a long time as they flew through space, the gas giant coming into view far in the distance.

"None of this makes sense to me." Katana mumbled to herself.

Howell considered letting it go, but he was curious. "What do you mean?"

"All of it! From day one when we encountered your team, every move the Wraith make has been un-Wraith like." Katana leaned back in her seat, having obviously forgotten what happened last time she did that. Kicking her heels up onto the dashboard, she folded her arms and narrowed her eyes. Howell was reminded again that he'd yet to see an ugly Traveler.

"Are you blaming us?"

"Depends. Is this your fault?" Katana asked jokingly. When Howell didn't answer, she whirled around and stared.

"No! Not exactly. I have a theory, but there's not a whole lot of evidence to back it up. And my team in particular had nothing to do with how it happened." Howell defended.

"Well, go on!" She put her feet up on the DHD controls now to better stare at Howell as he spoke.

"You're of course familiar with the evil Asgards of this galaxy?" Howell asked, taking a deep breath as he gathered his thoughts.

"Of course."

"I wanted to call them Ass-guards, but no, that would be rude and

unnecessaryâ€¦" Bacon mumbled from the back. Conscious that he had an audience, Howell went on.

"Think about motive, risk and reward. What two things do these Asgard need to further their development?"

"From what McKay and Jackson said, the extinction of the Wraith and human DNA." Katana answered. Howell shook his head.

"Wrong, try again. Be simpler this time." Howell used a game-show-host type voice, smiling a little as he did.

It was obvious Katana was thinking hard, but she came up with nothing. Bane answered for her.

"The threat of the Wraith removed, and the freedom to experiment as they please."

"Yes to the first part, but no cigar on the second. What's the best way to eliminate a threat without destroying it?" Howell asked, enjoying the look of frustration on Labrea's face.

"I don't get it, what are you trying to say?"

"The Wraith have cloning technology, besides access to humans and a powerful fleet. The Asgard have power generation similar to the Ancients, and the need for said cloning knowledge. I saw an Asgard computer onboard that hive ship, and we've been seeing unusual Wraith behavior for weeks now. Do I need to spell it out?" Howell asked. Finally, the light-bulb went off over Katana's head.

"You think they made an alliance!" She shouted suddenly. Bane nodded knowingly, while the rest of the passengers looked stunned.

"The Wraith need power. The Asgard have it. The Asgard need ships, the Wraith have them. Knowledge of cloning could be shared mutually, and there you have it. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em, as Bacon would say." Howell expanded the idea, filling in all of the blanks he'd noticed himself.

"Sheppard told me earlier that the reason Atlantis lifted off and flew away was because a Wraith Hive ship powered by a ZPM was headed for Earth. How did the Wraith adapt an organic ship to an Ancient based power source so quickly? McKay admitted that they did it faster than he expected. Almost like they had help."

"Back on the planet's surface, the Wraith charged our lines again and again, even throwing away their weapons and fighting hand to hand. Almost like whoever was giving the orders \_wanted\_ a bloody brawl that would enrage both sides. At the end of the day, it's in the Asgard's best interest to see their enemies kill each other off. I didn't know for sure that the Wraith were under the Asgard's orders until I saw that panel in the hive ship." Howell thought back to the harrowing few minutes that elapsed on the alien craft, still shocked he'd made it out in one piece.

"That console was tied into every system onboard their ship and I saw a stream of orders coming in from another source. That hive was flying on remote control; that's why there were so few Wraith officers and it was so easy to transfer control to the Traveler ship.

The program was already there, I just switched up who was giving the orders."

"And finally, why would every queen in the galaxy come together in one place? Perhaps to discuss a historic alliance? With Asgard power and Wraith cloning, the two most dangerous races in the galaxy have just joined forces. And now there's a fleet of what must be 'super-hives' heading for the planet to protect it from outside interference. They've got something good going, and they know it." Howell finished.

Labrea looked stunned as all the pieces came together.

"But you can't know this for sure!" She accused. Howell shrugged as he took the controls again.

"We'll know shortly. If I'm right, the Sun Tzu, or 'Enterprise' as Sheppard wants to call it, is in for a big surprise. Dial the gate."

While he'd been talking, they'd approached the space-gate and were in range already. Above them, the milky-blue swirls of the gas-giants atmosphere painted a blue glow on the glass in front of them. In the distance, a rocky moon hung in space, it's only interesting feature being the gate in orbit above it. Why the Ancients had put a gate in the system, Howell could only guess.

As Katana dialed the DHD, Howell slowed the little ship down and tried to line it up with the gate's nerve-wracking small silhouette.

"Here we go."

## 19. Nightmare

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**><p>**Traveling through the Stargate is a very unique experience; few people can really describe it. Every molecule of your body is broken down, converted into energy, and strung along a wormhole in space. For a brief moment, your body is no different than the energy coursing through a star, or the kind keeping a planet floating in orbit.**<p>**

You can't 'see' anything; you don't have eyes. But you can sense thingsâ€¦ Comets, floating through the void; planets, hovering ominously around you; stars, burning throughout time with enough heat and energy to melt everything you've ever known or seenâ€¦ You can even feel the static hum of Quantum jitters; the very pulse of the universe, like a heartbeat in the back of your mind. All of this



while being squeezed through an envelope of energy, to another point in the vast universe.

It's a breathtaking experience, even for those who've traveled the gate system for decades. Howell and his team weren't nearly that experienced, so the feeling was still new and exhilarating.

"Wowâ€|" Katana whispered to herself, shuddering a little as the jumper emerged on the other side of the space gate.

"First time through?" Howell asked curiously. He forced the dilapidated ship through the event horizon and to a safe distance away, but didn't go any farther.

"Not quite, but my first time in a Gateship. I can see why your people use these so regularly." Katana still looked electrified after the short trip, rolling her shoulders to clear the tension.

"Are we in range to transmitâ€|" Howell started to ask. He stopped short as a massive hyper-space window opened, and ships started to appear less than a mile away. In space, that was dangerously close. It would have been concerning even if they were human ships; these were not.

"Oh noâ€|" Katana's breath caught in her throat as she watched \_twenty\_ Wraith hive ships exit hyper-space and fly into a formation.

"It'll have to be close enough." Howell snapped, bringing up the communications array.

"This is Colonel Howell to any ships that can hear me. Turn back immediately! It's a trap, I repeat, turn back-"

Again he was interrupted. More hyper-space windows opened, and this time, it \_was\_ human vessels being spit out into normal space.

"Oh crapâ€|" Mila's voice drifted forward from the rear, and all of the passengers came forward to watch the unfolding disaster.

Nine human ships stood in the blackness, slightly above the tiny Jumper. Across from them, twenty hive ships waited in suspense. Howell did a quick scan of the hives and confirmed his earlier theory.

"I was right. Those are super-hives; the same kind that almost destroyed the Sun Tzu in the first place." Howell said calmly. Somehow, despite the slaughter that was about to take place, he was calm. It was like watching a movie where you already knew the ending; he was perfectly aware of what was about to happen.

Katana, however, was not so serene. "We have to do something!"

"What can we do? We're out of drones and we have no cloak. All we can do is watch." Howell reminded her. And all of a sudden, the show started.

The eight Traveler ships were flying behind the Sun Tzu in a 'V' formation; they quickly accelerated to a more defensive position around the still battered ship. Even with a week of repairs under her

belt, the Sun Tzu wasn't up to speed. Her engines were the only things that were working properly, and the patch job on the hull was frighteningly thin. One direct hit to her exposed hull would end her for good.

But the Traveler captains knew that. They bravely positioned their ships to intercept the first broadside from the Wraith armada, and not a moment too soon.

The Wraith ships had turned slightly to one side, giving their cannons a better angle. White hot balls of fire shot out from each gun port, clearing the hull like ghosts rising from graves. They shot out into the night, aimed straight for the human vessels.

As they hit the Traveler's shields, Howell could practically feel the impact. The little ships seemed to actually be pushed back with the force of the blows; their shields buckled under the strain of just one barrage.

Katana watched breathlessly as her friends marched to their deaths, and Howell felt sorry for the woman. He, at least, had no one to lose on the doomed ships. Except Larrin.

As they all watched in silence, the humans fired back. Wave after wave of red bolts from Traveler cannons fired, flying alongside the twin plasma beams of the Sun Tzu's own cannons. They all hit one ship; the goal had apparently been to take out at least one of the massive vessels before they were destroyed.

As the cannon fire hit, bright gushers of flame erupted from the hull's thick surface; explosions rocked the massive ship. The entire skin of the hive seemed to be blooming in brilliant red blossoms, and for a moment Howell thought they had a chance of winning. But then the fires died, and the now blackened and scarred hull was revealed to be fully intact. Their weapons had bruised, but not broken the enemy ship.

The Wraith prepared to fire again, and Katana looked away from the battle.

"We have to do \_something\_!" She shouted, pounding her fist on the Jumper's controls.

"Like what? Leave?" Howell demanded, ripping his own gaze away from the scene.

"Scan for weaknesses, board one of the hives, something!" Katana's eyes were watering, and her jaw started to quiver. Not from sadness, but from rage. She was so furious she was about to explode, and there was nothing they could do.

"Wait, what's that?" Krag pointed over Howell's shoulder a spot above the Wraith armada.

"It looks like another ship!" Bacon gasped, his jaw dropping at the sight.

"It's an Asgard vessel; probably monitoring the hive's status. Maybe there\_ is\_ something we can doâ€¦!" Howell jammed the control levers forward, the Jumper zoomed off into the distance.

"What are we going to do? Ram them?" Bane demanded, holding onto the seat beside him for balance. The ship was being rocked by the turbulence of the cannon fire above them.

"Maybe, if I can't think of something better!" Howell admitted. If the Asgard ship was there, it must be controlling the other hives. At least that was Howell's theory.

"Why don't our ships just jump to hyper-space?" Mila asked, turning to Krag as the Jumper flew through another barrage.

"The first barrage probably took out their engines." Krag told her, putting an arm around her protectively. The ship was rocked again as another bolt of Wraith fire came within inches of their ship. The Wraith had seen them, and were aiming more than a few shots their way.

"Not all of them! There must be a few that can escape!"

"Maybe. But it looks like they don't want to leave anyone behind." Krag looked pale now as he realized that Howell hadn't yet thought of another plan. Ramming the Asgard vessel still looked like their best bet.

"What about beaming everyone else aboard the Enterprise? Then they couldâ€¦"

"If he could, he would have by now Mila." Krag interrupted. He squeezed her shoulder and bit his lip, trying to think of something encouraging to say.

"With their shields up, no one's beaming anywhere."

The Jumper was passing over one of the hives, and now the Asgard ship was close enough to make out the shape and size of it. It looked no different than the one Katana and Sheppard had destroyed months ago with her ship.

"Hold on!" Howell threw the ship to the left as a Wraith blast impacted the hull in front of them. Bits of hull and even a few dying Wraith floated out, and Howell's face lit up.

"They must be targeting us automaticallyâ€¦ like they're being controlled by a computer!" Howell whispered. He gunned the engines, and flew straight for the Asgard ship again.

"What are you talking about?" Katana demanded, holding on for dear life as another shot passed them.

"That ship just fired on another one because they thought they would hit us! We can trick the Wraith cannons into firing at us, and lead the shots right into that Asgard ship!" Howell explained.

They were so close to the enemy vessel they could see the windows and deck plates on it now; Howell curved around the side of it as fast as he could as another shot flew past them.

"Hold on!" Howell shouted, swerving right at the last second. They flew behind the Asgard vessel, and a shot from the Wraith hive hit

the Asgard shields where they'd been seconds prior!

"Yes! A few more of those andâ€¦" Howell stopped mid sentence as a bright orange light lit up the windshield.

"Noâ€¦" Katana moaned and put her hand over her mouth as not one, but two Traveler ships exploded.

The blast sent shrapnel and flames into the hulls of two more ships, causing a chain reaction. Four erupted in fiery blasts, with bits of hull and engine manifolds flying everywhere. Still the merciless Wraith kept firing, sending more and more bolts into the mess. Five ships were gone. Now six. Seven and eight followed, the blast wave reaching the hives in what looked like one last attempt to hurt their enemies.

But the fires started to die, the metal started to disperse, and the Wraith triumphantly ceased fire. But to everyone's amazement, one last ship flew from ashes, straight for Howell's Jumper.

"The Enterprise! It survived!" Bane shouted, watching in fascination as the battered ship flew towards them, rail guns still firing.

"Here we go!" Howell had time to stand up and step back from the controls before the bright white light engulfed them, and they were beamed to the other ship.

The bridge of the former Sun Tzu was in surprisingly good condition, considering the horrors it had just survived. The green light of a hyper-space window filled the room, and they were away.

Howell turned around to face the 'crew' of the ship, still a little dazed at the sudden transport. Sheppard sat at one station and McKay at the other. The captain's chair was empty, and the two men seemed to be alone for the moment.

"Colonel Sheppard, what happened?" Howell asked cautiously, watching as the man ran a hand over his face.

"What do you think?" He asked brokenly. His eyes were bloodshot and his face was pale as he stuttered out the words.

"We lost. We lost everything. There were more super-hives, and they beat us. We lost every Traveler ship we brought; I couldn't save any of them. Not evenâ€¦" He jumped up from the console and ran out of the room. McKay looked ready to join him, but stayed where he was.

"I don'tâ€¦ I don't understand itâ€¦." His jaw kept moving, but no more words came out. Krag walked over to him and gently nudged him aside, taking the helm from the shaky man.

"It should have worked! We were far enough out that they shouldn't have seen usâ€¦"

"Super-hives, Doctor. They saw you coming from a mile away." Howell said callously.

"They're gone, the Travelers are goneâ€¦ Why didâ€¦" McKay walked out

of the room too, shaking and sweating uncontrollably. The door hissed shut and Howell's team stood alone in the room.

Peabody had been silent for entire ordeal, but he spoke up now as Rodney left.

"So what do we do now, Colonel?"

They all turned to face him, as if he would have all the answers in front of him. He didn't. Not by a long shot. But he knew what they'd have to do in the short term.

"Set a course for the Traveler home-world. We'll decide what to do there. And keep an eye on those super-hives. Why they chose to unveil them now and not earlier, I don't know. But they will be coming after us soon." Howell ordered, easing himself into the captain's seat. Krag nodded quickly and punched in a few commands, directing the ship on its way.

Katana was weeping now, sitting against one wall with her head in her hands. Mila slunk down beside her, her face a mask of horror as it all hit her all at once.

"What are we going to do now?" Mila asked miserably. Peabody and Bane went to try and comfort the two, while Bacon stood and stared out the window thoughtfully.

The question kept rattling around in Howell's mind. What would they do?

## 20. He Knew How to Kill

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><p>With Krag at the helm and Howell in command, the nine of them all made it back to the Traveler home world. Sheppard and McKay were beyond upset for about an hour; Sheppard at the loss of Larrin, McKay at the fact he'd been wrong.<br>McKay had told them all, himself included, that the super-hive was gone and that there was no possibility of another one being out there. He was wrong. The Wraith must have been keeping them back from the front lines until they were totally adapted to Asgard power, but at the sight of the advancing human fleet, they came out of the shadows.

The Sun Tzu was in orbit of the Traveler world, and the council members on the surface refused to believe what Howell was telling them. They went back and forth for close to half an hour before Katana gathered herself enough to confirm their fears.

The Traveler fleet was gone. Totally and utterly gone. There was no

other plan, there was no quick fix. They had messed up, now it was all over.

"The council doesn't know what to do. We now have one ship in our fleet and it doesn't even have a hyper-drive!" Katana explained, pacing back and forth on the bridge. Howell stood up from his chair and took a tentative step towards her.

"I know."

"We don't know if all of our people can fit onto just one ship; running may not be an option! And we can't use the gate because we left our Jumper back on the battlefield!"

"I know." Howell took another step towards her as she furiously wiped her eyes with her palms.

"The Wraith know we're here, and they know we can't stop them!" Katana's breath caught in her throat and she put her hand to her mouth.

"She was like a sister to me!"

Howell was finally close enough to put a comforting hand on her shoulder, and she practically flung herself into his arms. She buried her head into his shoulder and wept bitterly, with Howell awkwardly holding her and trying to comfort her.

"What are we going to do?" She asked again.

"We have a plan." Sheppard's voice took them both off guard, and they turned to see him standing in the doorway to the bridge. He was looking more alive now; his face had some color to it and his eyes weren't red any more.

"We're going to get you and your people to safety. McKay has a plan to use this ship to rebuild the intergalactic gate bridge. We only lost a few gates from it; it shouldn't take long to!"

"No." Howell interrupted him with a stone cold expression and one word.

"Excuse me?" Sheppard demanded, looking at Howell like he'd grown a second head.

"I said no. We have to fight back. If that fleet heads for Milky Way we'll have no way to stop them. We have to fight them here." Howell answered, folding his arms. Katana stepped away from him, trying to decide whose side to take.

"Look, I respect that you have a plan, this 'Valkerie' thing sounds pretty cool, but need I remind you that we just lost eight ships to those things? We can't fight back, Howell!" Sheppard shouted, pointing a finger at Howell as he spoke.

"We can and we will. We still have nukes and 302's. We'll do what we can over time, wear them down, build up a force to-"

"It's not possible Howell! Get your head out of your-"

This time Howell interrupted Sheppard. With a right hook across Sheppard's jaw.

Sheppard reeled from the blow, looking truly appalled that Howell would dare touch him. He came up swinging, and delivered a punishing blow to Howell's gut. Howell only grunted, before kneeing Sheppard in the face and kicking him backwards.

"Stop it, both of you!" Katana whipped out her gun and turned it to 'stun', pointing it at Howell menacingly.

Howell took a step back, letting Sheppard get back on his feet and Katana get to safe distance. He smiled as he watched the two stare at him; it looked like they'd seen a monster. Maybe they had.

"The loss of Larrin was regrettable. The loss of eight ships was crippling. But we are not wasting more time and resources trying to scurry away to the Milky Way galaxy. My team and this ship are staying right here." Howell pointed to the floor dramatically, staring hard at Sheppard.

He had a line of blood running from his lip, and still looked ready to go another round with Howell. Instead, he straightened his jacket and nodded almost respectfully.

"Fine. We'll take our Jumper and rig the hyper-drive to our last ship. You and your team can do what you want. I'm going to concentrate on saving lives!"

"Whose lives, Sheppard? Humans already doomed to be fed on the Wraith? Thanks to your disastrous campaign, there are what, a few \_thousand\_ left in this galaxy?" Howell asked, making a show of thinking hard on the number of survivors.

"I'll work on saving the \_billions\_ of people still on Earth."

"You sick, twisted, son of a-" Sheppard didn't get a chance to finish his sentence. Howell really didn't like swearing; naturally he shot the man in response.

As Sheppard hit the deck, stunned from a blast from Howell's gun, Katana looked horrified.

"So our lives don't matter as much as yours?" She demanded. Howell shrugged.

"I have my mission. You have yours. I'll leave the jumper and its drive with you; my team and I are going to hit the Wraith with everything we have."

"We \_tried\_ that!" She screamed, looking ready to hit him herself.

"We'll try again. Now get off my bridge, and into that Jumper. McKay is flying you and this sack of crap!" He nudged the stunned Sheppard with his boot. "â€¦down to the planet as soon as possible."

The 'sack of crap' woke up in a very bad mood a half hour later. McKay was very shakily flying the Jumper, with a concerned Katana and

Mila leaning over Sheppard behind him.

"Is he awake yet? Because if I crash this thing into the ice he will never let me hear the end of it!" Rodney complained, nervously glancing in a dozen directions at once. He had the HUD up in a futile attempt to cut through the snow storm brewing right where they needed to be.

"Yes he is. And no I won't." Sheppard moaned. Katana smiled a little and helped him to his feet.

"Where are we?" Sheppard asked groggily. McKay dodged another large chunk of ice, but the inertial dampeners softened the force of his almost 90 degree turn.

"Rapidly descending to the planet's surface. If you want toâ€¦" McKay gestured at the controls and stood up from his chair. Sheppard quickly took control and brought the nose of the craft up, much to the two women's relief. McKay's flying was worse than Howell's.

"What happened? Why are we in the Jumper?"

"Howell wasn't bluffing." Katana sneered. "He dragged you through the Sun Tzu and dumped you here before ordering McKay on board at gunpoint."

"That guy is insane! And how did he know about my allergy to citrus? He said he couldn't risk stunning me because I was the only one capable of flying, so he threatened to squirt lemon juice on me!" McKay whined.

"He then jettisoned us and flew off." Katana finished.

"You two came along?" Sheppard asked, despite the obvious answer.

Katana nodded, but Mila was the one who answered.

"What choice did we have?"

They were all quiet for a while as Sheppard flew, and eventually they made it down to Larrin's old hangar. The doors opened for them obligingly, and the last Traveler ship in the galaxy was waiting for them.

"McKay, get with Mila on repairing that drive and getting it loaded on Larrin's ship." Sheppard ordered as soon as they touched down.

"Um, that may be a problem. This was really only meant for one trip back when I \_first\_ built it; it really isn't even designed toâ€¦" Rodney started to say.

"Rodney. Please." Sheppard's tone of voice didn't invite any more arguing. He and Mila fairly ran from the Jumper, leaving Katana and Sheppard behind.

"You and Larrin were close, weren't you?" Katana asked cautiously. Sheppard only nodded.



"I guess you were too."

"She was like a sister to me. I don't know how we're going to get past this. My people are almost extinct, now." Katana realized, stroking her chin thoughtfully as she stared at Larrin's old ship.

"I'm not going to let anyone else die, Katana. We're going to get you and your people to Milky Way; no Wraith to be found and plenty of room to rebuild." He promised.

"I don't know if my people will go along with that!" Katana said with dry laugh. "This is our home. We've always been Travelers."

"Well, now you'll be Traveling to another galaxy. With the Wraith this powerfulâ€|" Sheppard shook his head and stood up, powering down the Jumper as he did. "I don't think anyone's safe anymore."

\* \* \*

><p>Before leaving entirely, Colonel Howell thoughtfully brought their system's Stargate into orbit of the icy world. He sent down a short transmission telling them about it, but said nothing more. As soon as the gate drifted clear of the Sun Tzu's F-302 bay, the ship jumped to Hyperspace. But not before four men were beamed down to the surface.<p>

Major's Bane and Bacon, Captain Krag and Percival Peabody all stood in Larrin's hangar, looking bitter and confused. It took Katana a minute to realize what had happened.

Then it came to her. Howell had lost it. He had beamed his team down to the planet's surface and flown off himself. He had a ship, a cargo-hold full of nukes, and a vengeance. And he was alone.

"What happened? Where's Howell?" Sheppard didn't pick up on it as fast; he was sitting in the back of his Jumper after helping McKay carry the hyper-drive out. As he watched, Bane shook his head in wonder and Bacon practically spit.

"He left us behind. We tried to talk him out of it; he wouldn't listen." Bane partially explained. Sheppard still looked confused, so Bacon spelled it out.

"He's gone nuts. Fancies himself a Captain Ahab; said he's gonna wipe out the Wraith all by his lonesome. Idiot." Bacon stormed off in a foul temper, and people wisely cleared the way. Peabody looked flustered, as if he'd been transported mid-sentence.

"He dropped off the gate in orbit to make it easier to evacuate. But that's as much as he's willing to do. We're on our own." Bane told them all.

All at once, the man sagged like all of his strength had left him at once. Howell was his oldest surviving friend. He thought he knew the man as well as he knew himself. But he was wrong.

"Colonel Sheppard?" Bane asked, looking up at him. "I know that you didn't ask for us, but it seems we're now under your command. What

are your orders?"

The question caught Sheppard off guard; he hadn't been expecting anything so humble from friends of Howell. He rubbed the back of his neck and studied his boots carefully before answering.

"I don't have any for you. Get some rest; you've all earned it after the past week."

Bane nodded respectfully, and the rest of Howell's men followed meekly after him. They headed for the bunks with sagging shoulders and tired expressions. It had been a long few weeks.

\* \* \*

><p>The council met and argued in circles for over an hour before Katana snapped and told them what was going to happen. Councilwoman Larrin was so shocked at the loss of her daughter that she resigned, permanently, and wandered off into the empty corridors.<p>

The final decision was simple. McKay and Mila, with the help of Krag and Peabody, would first outfit the newly named Larrin's Memory with the Jumper's hyper-drive. They would then harvest a few more Stargates to repair the intergalactic gate bridge, and while Sheppard and Katana were doing that, McKay would right another macro for the bridge that would bypass the destroyed Midway station. They figured all in all, it would take a month to get the bridge operational. After that, the evacuations would start.

Sheppard also managed to snag the space gate out of orbit and fly it back down to the surface, though he almost broke the drive-pods off of the Jumper in the process. Ronon and Teyla returned to the Traveler base, as well as the surviving Athosians.

The Wraith had hit again. New Athos was now smoldering, and the few survivors had been desperate for a place to run to. Without Atlantis, their options were limited.

As Teyla walked through the gate and into Larrin's hangar, Sheppard noticed Torren in her arms. The sleeping infant looked peaceful, but his mother looked anything but.

As Sheppard watched the last of the survivors stream through, he realized why. Kanaan, the baby's father, wasn't with them. With a tear in her eye, Teyla nodded at Sheppard's unspoken question. Ronon was walking beside her, looking worn out as if from a long battle. His sword still had dried blood on it.

"Teyla, are youâ€|?"

"Fine. But Kanaanâ€|" She wiped her eyes with her free hand, and Ronon's expression grew even darker.

"It was my fault. I shouldn't have let him go off on his ownâ€|" He ran a hand over his face and walked away, still upset over the ordeal.

"We did all we could. It was not enough." Teyla explained.

"We've had a lot of that lately. Come on, let's get you settled;

there's plenty of room here now." Sheppard said morbidly. He and Katana led the Athosians to the now emptied bunks, handing out blankets and bottles of water as they went.

They all settled down for the long night, all of them hoping and praying that the Wraith would wait one more day, one more night, maybe even a week before they came back in full force. Because when they did, all hope would be gone.

\* \* \*

><p>Far away, flying endlessly through the blackness of space, John Howell sat alone on his bridge. He wasn't lonely. The quiet wasn't getting to him. He had enough rattling around in his head to keep him busy for months.<p>

He missed her. He'd allow himself that; he missed Larrin. But as he sat motionless in his chair, white knuckled and still as a statue, his mind cracked even farther.

He'd loved her. He'd known her for two weeks and he loved her. She was the only woman he'd ever met that was on his level. She was smart enough to keep up with him. She was cruel enough to understand him. She was beautiful.

And she was gone. She'd alienated him, professed her undying love to Sheppard, and then gotten herself killed on Sheppard's orders. He wanted to scream. He wanted to cry. He wanted to kill someone.

Instead he kept flying. He knew where he was going. There were Wraith there. And he knew how to kill. Over twenty years he'd been taught that lesson well. He knew how to kill.

## 21. Runners

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\* \* \*

><p>Major Bane was sitting alone in Larrin's hangar, staring at the recently grounded Stargate thoughtfully. He was the last person on the base; everyone else had left. Major Bacon had been led by Colonel Sheppard to the Milky Way refugee camp; he and the rest of Howell's old team were getting the Pegasus Galaxy humans settled.<p>

Bane alone was left behind, waiting on any other survivors that might show up. The Travelers were all gone. What was left after the massacre had been all too happy to go. The Athosians had also been anxious to go to a galaxy free of the Wraith. The Goa'uld were broken and fading fast, the Ori had retreated to their own galaxy, and the Lucian Allianceâ€|

Sheppard had told them all about the Lucian Alliance as soon as he'd had the chance to. Pegasus was no longer safe for humans, but Milky Way was only so much better.

Sheppard had mentioned cryptically that he'd had to steal the Jumper and hyper-drive to get to Pegasus; what he'd neglected to mention was why. Earth was in chaos. The Stargate program had been found out and revealed in a disastrous way; a fishing boat had been rescued by Major Lorne's team, and the startled fishermen couldn't keep a secret. Lorne had claimed that he had no choice; if not for his Jumper borne rescue, they would have drowned. Unfortunately, the secret was out.

The civilian population was outraged. There was a total upheaval in America that led to impeachment attempts, riots, and general outcry over the massive cover-up. The IOA's 'Valkerie' operation had been an eleventh hour plan; it was the last orders they were able to give.

There was no possibility of reinforcements. Earth was trying to keep their fleet in working order as well as defend against Lucian Alliance attacks. The loss of the Sun Tzu was crippling to their major operations. The damage to the Daedalus and the Apollo were still being tended to; getting resources and funds allocated to the program was getting harder and harder.

Even though Earth's battle cruisers were more than a match for the Lucian Alliance's outdated mother ships, the scope of the criminal organizations operations were staggering. At it's prime the SG-C would have been hard put to deal with them; nowâ€¦|

The Alpha-Site was the new site of the SG-C and Atlantis was being studied by a purely civilian team. Sheppard was having a tough time getting enough tents and MRE's to his new refugees. Teyla had taken on more and more responsibility as the unofficial leader of the Pegasus refugees, and Ronon was already helping out on missions against the Lucian Alliance forces.

Bane alone was left in Pegasus, trying to make sense of it all. Howell was off in some other part of the galaxy, doing who knew what with the Sun Tzu. It had been a month and a half and there was still no word from him.

Puzzling as his sudden snap had been, there was something else on Bane's mind. They'd found a system with a space gate with no habitable planets. Ten minutes on the surface of the world Bane was now sitting on would kill any human or Wraith. Why would the Ancients have put a gate here?

They'd found a Jumper crashed in the ice. The pilot had been desperate to get here; why? What was so special about this planet that he or she chose to die in an attempt to get here?

Bane had thought about all of their problems over and over again. It all boiled down to two incidents. John Howell was broken, and had been for years. His life and his career had been ripped into pieces and sewn together like some abomination from Frankenstein's laboratory. Because of that, he'd made decisions that had ruined both himself and his team.

The other was the Attero Device affair. The Asgard of Pegasus had been in hiding for thousands of years. They'd reemerged for the sake of destroying the gate network and the Wraith. Instead, they'd lost another ship, yet more personnel and any chance they had at beating the Wraith. That had led them to somehow forge an Alliance with the Wraith.

The What If's kept rattling around in his head. But instead of being able to do anything to change the situation, he was waiting for any other survivors to show up. When he was sure no more were coming, he would take the Jumper Sheppard had left activated through the gate, and it would be over.

And so he sat alone, still trying to piece together what had happened. Howell was gone; mentally and physically. Sheppard was back in Milky Way with the rest of his team, trying to salvage the situation. The only humans left in the galaxy were the tenacious Genii and the few stragglers that didn't trust them enough to leave their homes. With so little food left, the Wraith would hopefully starve and die out on their own.

But as he was smiling at the possibility, Bane heard a strange sound. The hangar doors were being opened, and he hadn't done it.

Bane stood up and pulled out his Traveler style gun, wishing desperately for a decent rifle, and waited. Slowly the doors opened wide enough for a person to enter, and a silhouette could be seen through the snow streaming into the hangar. Bane swallowed hard and focused on the face, shocked at what he was seeing.

John Howell had just wandered inside from a blizzard. He was dirty, ragged, and worn. His clothes were ripped and barely there, and his skin was more bruised than not. As he slowly walked closer, Bane saw the look in his eye.

Utter insanity stared back out at him. Howell was gone; there was no denying it.

"It's cold out there. Mind if I come in?" Howell asked, wandering past Bane as if he wasn't there.

His steps were short and seemingly random, while his arms remained crossed over the tattered remains of his jacket. Slowly, he came to a stop in front of a stack of crates as the hangar doors closed behind them.

Bane still had his gun leveled, and didn't dare lower it. Howell wasn't armed, but still looked dangerous. He'd grown up in the worst neighborhood in the state of Nevada; he'd known how to fight before he could read.

"Colonel? What are you doing here?" Bane asked hesitantly.

Howell looked as though he hadn't heard him. "They could have at least put me outâ€¦ that crack surgeon went deepâ€¦"

"Howell. Look at me." Bane ordered, taking a step towards him.

"It's so cold out there! Much warmer in that hiveâ€¦ Wraith like warm

placesâ€¦ Like bugsâ€¦"

"John! Look at me!" Bane was shouting now, and his voice echoed around the empty hangar. Finally, Howell looked up him.

"What happened? Why are you here?" Bane asked carefully. He was trying hard to decide if Howell was actually there, or if he too had snapped.

Howell smiled broadly, another sign that something was seriously wrong.

"I'm like Ronon now! I'm a Runner! And the Wraith say they're going to Earth! They made friends with the Asgard; the ones Sheppard didn't kill... They're making all of these lovely hybrid ships... Half Asgard, half Wraith... Nice, new, shiny sensors found the way to earth..." Howell beamed. He sounded like a child telling his parents about the first day of school. Bane's heart pounded in his ears as he tried to wrap his head around that.

"What do you mean?"

"Like bread crumbsâ€¦" Howell stood up again and walked around in circles, still smiling insanely. "Like little bread crumbs, leading from galaxy to anotherâ€¦ Dumb McKay. He lined up all those gates in a rowâ€¦"

Bane's fears were realized as Howell managed to get out what he'd heard. The Wraith had found the gate bridge, which of course led right the Milky Way. How they'd done it didn't matter; maybe they'd gotten smart and realized that there were only so many galaxies nearby; maybe they'd gotten lucky with their upgraded sensors. Their Traveler ship \_had\_ made more than a few trips out there recently.

"So they beamed you down here after making you a runner?" Bane asked, mostly to himself.

"It hurt. And they took my shipâ€¦ I liked that ship, it was so big and roomyâ€¦"

"We need to go. Now." Bane holstered his weapon and ran for the Jumper, hoping against hope he'd make it in time.

But as he made it to the front of the ship, he saw the event horizon form. The Wraith had already dialed in.

"Howell! Let's go!" Bane sprinted out of the Jumper and called out to the deranged Colonel, his mind racing as to the possibilities. If Howell was a Runner, they'd be able to track him. But that wasn't so bad; they were in an underground base on a hostile world; it wasn't like there many places to hide anyway.

But Bane wasn't leaving him behind. Even after all Howell had done, Bane couldn't just leave him. So he literally dragged the larger man along, drawing his gun again as they slowly made their way towards a door. Beyond the door was a long corridor that led to another hangar; Bane was hoping his little gun had enough juice to collapse the tunnel's ceiling. It was a long shot, but so was any other move he could make.

As he opened the door and convinced Howell to walk on his own, he heard the sound of a body emerging on their side of the gate. Bane whipped out his gun and fired a quick shot, catching the hunter in the shoulder.

He shoved Howell through the door and fired two more shots as a half dozen Wraith came through, all armed to the teeth and looking eager for a fight.

"Come on! You think we'll be easy? Come and get us!" Bane shouted wildly as he fired again. Four Wraith were dead on the cold metal floor, but more kept coming. He growled in frustration and ducked through the door as stun blasts started peppering the wall.

He shot the door console on the other side, but he knew the thin metal door wouldn't hold them long. The entire base was made out of scrounged metal and slapped together as quickly as possible. It was no fortress.

Bane also realized his plan of collapsing the tunnel was a no-go; the ceiling in that tunnel was solid rock. Even if it had been a thin sheet of ice, it still wouldn't have been likely to cave in on itself with only Bane firing at it.

Howell was lucid enough to realize he needed to keep up with Bane, and the two ran down the corridor as fast as they could. The banging on the door behind them was getting louder, and Bane knew it wouldn't hold forever. He ran as fast and hard as he could, with his insane commanding officer beside him, still grinning from ear to ear. It occurred to Bane that he wasn't going to live through the night.

\* \* \*

><p>Four hours later, Bane was still breathing. So was Howell, despite a few very close calls. They were huddled together in the control room, hiding from the now hundreds of Wraith swarming the base. They'd dodged and woven their way through three hangars and the small greenhouse the Travelers had built, but only managed to drain the cartridge on Bane's gun and kill a small fraction of their pursuers. Bane knew it was only a matter of time now.<p>

"Hey! We forgot our Jumper, out in space near the super-hives!" Howell suddenly shouted, making Bane flinch.

"Not so loud, sir, not so loud!" Bane put a hand on the man's shoulder and spoke as if he were a child. Howell nodded and sat back down, staring off into empty space. Calling him 'sir' was the only way to get him to respond; otherwise, he'd just continue to do whatever random action he dreamed up.

"Are we going to go get it? It was pretty nice!" Howell whispered. Bane smiled, despite the desperate circumstances.

"No, sir, we're not. We have other worries now." But still, Bane couldn't help but wonder about the abandoned Jumper. That Ancient had been trying to get to this desolate world. That still made no sense to Bane.

"Can I play with the buttons?" Howell eagerly asked. Bane nodded

grudgingly, watching as the grown man ran to the computers and mashed randomly on the control consoles.

Whatever had happened to Howell aboard the Wraith ships had devastated him. Bane didn't know a man could go as far as he had. Sanity and logical thought were completely foreign to him now. Bane had heard of brainwashing being done by certain malicious Wraith; even the mighty Ronon had been bent to their will once. But this wasn't mind \_control\_, it was more like mind obliteration.

"Hey, I found the bat cave!" Howell whispered excitedly, pulling up a map somehow. Bane nodded again obligingly. He'd also found the Fortress of Solitude from Superman, the Particle Accelerator that made the Flash, and a new depth to Bane's patience.

"No, I really did! Come look!" Howell was dancing around, pointing wildly at something he'd found. Bane slowly stood up, stretching his aching muscles and blinking away his exhaustion.

"That's nice, sir. It really is. But we need toâ€¦" Bane stopped mid sentence and stared in wonder. He \_had\_ found a cave. Whether or not Batman was inside remained to be seen.

Ground penetration radar had been used to carve the tunnels that connected each hangar. Howell had accessed the system, and was running random scans when he actually found something.

There was a small crack in the ice branching off one corridor that ran for close to a quarter mile. Beyond the crack was a large chamber. It probably wasn't discovered the first time because the crack in the ice was five feet from the tunnel wall, and Howell had jacked up the sensitivity on the sensors to well past their normal range.

"Is Larrin here? I miss herâ€¦" Howell asked childishly, already bored with his game. Bane swallowed hard and tried to think of something to say.

"Um, no, sir. She's busy. But she'll be back soon." He managed to stutter out. But his attention was on the chamber Howell had found. If it was far enough out into the ice and rock, the Wraith might not be able to detect Howell's transmitter.

"Come on, sir. We have to go to the bat cave now."

## 22. Reset

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\* \* \*

><p>Bane and Howell were running down the icy corridors at top speed.



Bane was very conscious of the sound their footfalls made on the long corridor, but it didn't matter. The Wraith had to know where they were. That particular tunnel was on the edge of the complex; Howell's tracking beacon had to be coming in loud and clear to any hunters in the area.<p>

"Why are we running?" Howell suddenly asked, looking utterly confused. Bane was panting from the exertion and didn't answer immediately.

"Wraith, sirâ€|" He gasped as they slid to a stop. The blueprints Bane had practically memorized said that mysterious crack in the tunnel wall was right in front of them. What was on the other side, Bane had little to no clue. It might have been naturally occurring; the crack sure seemed to be. But the perfectly square chamber at the end of the crack seemed suspicious.

"The tunnel wall is mostly soft stone hereâ€|" Bane said, thinking out loud. The wall was mostly secure, but composed of loose rock. Each one of them was no more than a few square feet in size, but looked heavy.

"We need to dig?" Howell asked, his voice startling Bane somewhat. For a split second, he almost sounded human. He ruined it by cocking his head sideways chewing on his lip.

"Yes sir, we need to dig. Quickly." Bane shot a nervous glance over his shoulder before jumping onto the pile, shoving aside the rocks as he went. Surprisingly, only a few were very heavy. Most seemed to be incredibly porous and only a few pounds each.

Howell was no longer sane, and had to be directed like a child. But he was still strong. He'd been a weak, scrawny child that was abused by his father for years; over time, he'd built up enough muscle tone to ensure no one would ever push him around again.

Between the lightweight rocks and the brutish strength of Howell, the five feet worth of rock and rubble was cleared in only a few minutes of hard labor. Bane was starting to get a glimmer of hope before seeing the last barrier in their way.

"Uh ohâ€|" Howell made the understatement of the year and sat back to admire the giant sheet of ice. There was a crack that obviously led a long ways off; Bane's pocket flashlight illuminated the tunnel beyond. But the crack was only a foot tall and a few inches wide at the entrance, and the ice was several feet thick.

"Noâ€|" Bane leaned against the rock with one arm, wiping away the sweat on his forehead with the other. Options came to him and were just as quickly discarded. His gun was out of power, he had no explosives, and there were none within easy reach. The nearest armory was two levels up and guarded by a dozen Wraith.

"We need a bomb." Howell surmised, strumming his fingers on his chin thoughtfully. "Be back in a minute."

With that, Howell sprinted back down the corridor they'd just come from. Bane shouted for him to stop, but with no success. The giant man was still going, dead set on whatever goal he'd imagined up.

Major Lucas Bane slid down the rock into a sitting position, head resting on his knees. He was tired. He hadn't slept in hours, and hadn't slept well in days. Weeks, even. He'd fought, run, fought some more, and now dug his way to what he'd thought was a way out. Instead it was just another obstacle he had no clue how to conquer.

He hated the entire situation. He'd never liked fighting Wraith; they weren't logical or easy to understand. They hunted, they killed, and they tortured for pleasure. If he or anyone else was captured, they could look forward to a slow and painful death.

He'd preferred the idea of fighting Goa'uld and Jaffa. They at least followed orders given by arrogant and childish 'gods'. He could understand and even predict that. Instead, he now fought blood sucking aliens in another galaxy. Earth wasn't a wormhole away, it was a zpm-powered wormhole away, or maybe a six week ride on a battle cruiser away. He hated being away from his home that long, and he hadn't been there in months. He doubted now whether he'd ever see home again.

Ronon could kill Wraith with his bare hands. Teyla could find a way out of a labyrinth. Sheppard could think up a plan to kill a few hundred Wraith on the way out, and McKay could make it happen. But Howell's team?

They were broken. Always had been. That's the way Howell wanted them; broken. Easy to repair and build up the way he wanted.

"My how the tables have turnedâ€¦!" Bane laughed to himself. Now Howell was broken beyond repair, and they would both die in a hole. Not quite the glorious end Howell had imagined to his Valkerie mission.

"Move move move!" Howell came running back down the tunnel, holding something in his hands and screaming at the top of his lungs. Bane leapt out of the hole at the last second, and Howell threw a Wraith vest into the mouth of the crack in the ice!

"Where did youâ€¦?" Bane stopped mid sentence as he saw Howell's hands were covered in blood, and his face had a few more cuts and bruises. There was also a knife in his shoulder, which Bane carefully removed.

Seconds later, the self-destruct device went off, and bits of ice and rock were flung onto the floor of the corridor. Bane shielded his eyes as he heard the blast, while Howell stood and stared into the hole they'd dug.

"It worked!" Howell exclaimed, pumping his fist in the air. Sure enough, the small crack in the icy wall was now a hole wide enough for a minivan to drive through.

"Should we go?" Howell asked, already climbing back up the small hill of rocks. Bane stared in wonder at the tunnel beyond, nodding slowly.

"Yes we should."

\* \* \*

><p>The quarter mile of tunnel was no easy run. There was no floor; the entire 'tunnel' was in a sharp 'V' shape, with Howell and Bane slipping and sliding down the point of the 'V' the whole way. Added to their nerves as they crawled along was the sound of Wraith growling and hissing in their creepy way at the tunnel's mouth. Whoever Howell had gotten the vest from evidently had friends, and they were anxious to catch up with the two humans.<p>

Thankfully, the tunnel was so winding and curvy that they were in no danger of Wraith stunner blasts, but the Wraith wouldn't wait at the mouth forever. Sooner or later, they'd come after Bane and Howell with a vengeance.

"Up ahead of usâ€¦ there's another crackâ€¦ like two ends of a bendy strawâ€¦" Howell rambled on for another minute, but Bane couldn't hear his voice over the echoes.

He was right; the end of the crack led right to a doorway, and there was a room beyond. Bane was flooded with relief as he saw the telltale signs of Ancient architecture; they'd found whatever that Jumper pilot had been looking for at last.

"Shinyâ€¦" Howell whispered, sitting down on a small ledge in the ice. Bane finally crawled up the last of the slope beside him and examined the doorway with his flashlight.

"Oh come onâ€¦" He slapped it against his palm a few times, but to no avail. The battery was dead and it was pitch black in the tunnel. There were a few lights glowing dimly in the chamber beyond, but not enough to see by.

"Shiny." Howell stated firmly. Bane ignored him and stepped forward into the doorway, anxious to be off the ice.

He hit his forehead squarely onâ€¦ something, and bounced back onto the ice behind him.

"Shiny." Howell said again, nodding patronizingly down at Bane. Faster than his eye could follow, Howell elbowed the glass and shattered it into a thousand pieces. The sound was deafening in the tiny tunnel, and Bane had to shield his eyes again as glass flew everywhere.

"Shiny gone." Howell hopped through the now cleared pan, and into the room beyond.

Bane followed closely behind him, and the crazed man's ATA gene activated the lights and consoles around them. Bane watched as the room came to life, and realized just how large it was. For one thing, there were three more Jumpers inside, surrounded by computers, screens, and other equipment Bane couldn't begin to identify. The entire laboratory seemed to be abandoned, though.

"Oh, I know what this is!" Howell beamed, running straight to the ramp of the nearest ship.

"Don't touch thoseâ€¦" Bane said halfheartedly, staring in wonder at the room. Giant, floor to ceiling screens covered every wall, with the window they'd entered through being the only one without the

floating fabric-like devices.

How anyone would normally enter was a mystery; there was no door, no roof, not even a Stargate or a set of Rings.

"Why do they leave these things lying around?" Howell demanded from inside one Jumper. Bane turned around to see he'd already activated one ship and was crawling around the inside of another. He'd tripped on the device welded to the floor of the Jumper, and Bane jumped in surprise. He'd seen this device described before.

It occurred to Bane just where they were, and why that pilot had been so desperate to get here. They had stumbled onto one of Janus' labs, and sitting in front of them were experimental time machines.

Bane had heard of their use to make a failsafe mechanism for raising Atlantis from the ocean's floor, and Maybourne had inadvertently found another on a planet in the Milky Way. The unassuming little ships held the power to change time at any point, and from what Bane had read, they could even travel space just as quickly. Sheppard, in another timeline of course, had gotten up to orbit at the push of a button.

"Howell, get out of there now!" Bane ran for the man in the second Jumper, dreading the possibilities of might happen if the insane man managed to activate one.

He was running on the dusty floor, eyes set on the back of the chair Howell was now sitting in. The time machine resting in the back of the Jumper glowed ominously, the ramp was raised up, and the entire ship disappeared as Bane slid into the spot where it was supposed to be.

"No!" Bane didn't have time to wonder at the horrifying possibilities; the sounds of Wraith crawling up the tunnel was getting louder.

He had no other options left. There was one Jumper that Howell had thankfully left dormant; the other was lit up like a Christmas tree and waiting for a pilot. So many things ran through Bane's mind that he started to freeze. Wraith were coming. He was unarmed. Howell was gone, who knew where or when. And he had a time machine in front of him.

He couldn't let the Wraith get their hands on the machines; but what if they'd never found the lab in the first place?

\* \* \*

><p>Major Tyler Romine was not what you would consider a nice man. He was in his forties, balding, and starting to become overweight. He dreaded each physical examination he had to take to keep up with SG-C; he was deathly afraid of losing his position and the hefty paycheck associated with it. Being the commanding officer of SG-8 wasn't nearly as demanding as being on the prestigious SG-1, but it was still taxing.<p>

He rolled into his driveway in his old, beat up truck and slammed it into park. The knob occasionally stuck, so to compensate, he applied as much force as humanly possible every time he parked, so as to

'teach it a lesson'.

His lawn was dead, the paint on his house was peeling, and the trash hadn't been taken to the street on trash-day, so it was overflowing. He ignored all of this and stomped up to the front porch, jamming his key into the lock.

He grunted in surprise as he saw that the lock was broken off, and the door was swinging freely. He cursed himself for not carrying a gun and proceeded slowly inside. He hated calling the police and honestly didn't think whatever squatter had found his way inside would put up too much trouble. He would be wrong.

Sitting on a loveseat inside the darkened living room was horrifying mess of a man. His clothing was in tatters. His skin was bruised and cut badly, and still covered in dried blood. But what was most disturbing, besides the hollow, sunken eyes, was the collection of knives sitting on the coffee table. They were all arranged in a line, each one cleaned and sharpened.

"Whatâ€¦ Who are you? What are you doing here?" Romine demanded, dropping his keys in surprise. The man only smiled in response.

"You know me, Major Romine. You know me." His voice was like ice, and his smile was the most disturbing thing Romine had ever seen.

"What? No, I don'tâ€¦"

"You left me behind, Major. You left me behind on that planetâ€¦" Colonel John Howell stood up to face his former commanding officer, stepping slowly towards him as he did.

"No, you can't be him! That kid's on base right now!" Romine shouted, backing up until he hit the door.

"Don't worry!" Howell said softly, shooting out an arm to grab the man's neck in a vise-like grip. He grinned wider, and Romine almost passed out from fear.

"I have a theory, Major. I don't think you have a spine. Let's test this theory, shall we?"

### 23. Lost in Space (Again)

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**><strong>\*\*EDITIOR'S NOTE:** This is the first chapter in the second part of my fan-fiction. Since approximately half of my viewers despised the first part, I've written this one in a self-explanatory way that doesn't require the first part to make sense. I highly encourage anyone who's reading this to go back and read the first portion, as a lot of 'Easter eggs' will make more sense, but it's not

necessary. I hope you all enjoy this.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>Major Evan Lorne and his team had been through a lot over the years; abducted, shot, stunned, abducted againâ€| Lorne had always been the 'red-shirt that lived' in some people's mind. But that hadn't mattered to Captain John Howell. He'd always looked up to the man who'd replaced his commanding officer.<p>

Whatever had happened to Major Tyler Romine was a mystery. His neighbors had heard screams, there'd been U.F.O. sightings in the area, and no trace of him was ever found. Only ten hours before he was scheduled to go on a mission with the rest of his team, too. Howell had always hated the man who reminded him so much of his father, and secretly suspected the man had disappeared to Mexico for reasons of his own. The official investigation revealed nothing substantial, and Major Evan Lorne replaced him.

He had been a member of SG-11, but was transferred after the team took a severe hit on a mission to mine a deposit of Naquadah. He and his team were then transferred to Atlantis after the Daedalus showed up in the eleventh hour to break the siege of Atlantis, bringing a much needed ZPM to the city in the process.

Now the team was in trouble again, but Howell wasn't nervous or anxious. He knew either Lorne or Sheppard would figure out a way to save the day, and hopefully Teyla would show up somewhere in thereâ€|

"Sir, Lieutenant Reed and I have scouted the perimeter. There's nothing out here except a few squirrels." Captain Howell reported, adjusting his P-90 on his shoulder.

Major Lorne was bent over the DHD, examining it carefully as he listened to Howell.

"That's what I figured. And yet, someone had to have shot this thing." Lorne pointed out, nodding at the hole in the side of the console. Someone or something had taken a large chunk out of the DHD's pedestal, and whatever had done it looked suspiciously like a claymore. Where the squirrels had gotten the claymore, no one knew.

"Orders, sir?" Howell asked, glancing around at the wooded glade again.

"For now, sit tight. Atlantis will send a rescue mission eventually." Lorne sighed, stepping away from the DHD and the Stargate behind it.

There was no civilization around the gate, which was odd in itself. Pegasus humans were generally more advanced than Milky Way humans, at least before the Wraith woke up and started frantically culling the local populations. It was more likely for teams to encounter a Colonial America type population than a mid-evil hunter-gatherer tribe. There had even been a few Earth like civilizations, but those had been the Wraith's first target. Technology meant quality of living, which meant higher population, which meant more food. Nowadays Lorne's team mostly saw ruins, with survivors scavenging for

food and other necessities.

For some reason, this planet was untouched. No skyscrapers in the distance, no leather huts arranged around a bonfire, not even a broken down stone column or two. The gate had been plopped down in the forest and left, and it looked like the Ancients themselves might have been the last visitors. The Stargate was grown over with vines and huge tree roots, and 'clearing' was actually just an inexplicable hole in the dense woodlands. They hadn't seen the sky yet; the canopy far above was more than thick enough to cover it.

"Sir I hate to argue, but that blast from the Wraith dart must have made the gate connection jump, which explains why we're here and not in Atlantis. That being the case, there'd be no way for them to track where we wentâ€|" Howell pointed out, cringing a little as he saw Lorne's face.

"I know that, and you know that, but there's no point in dwelling on it. Come on, when have you seen McKay or Zelenka give up on this stuff? They'll figure it out. Eventually." Lorne said hopefully, scanning the perimeter again. Something was making them all jumpy, like a constant feeling of being watched. Captain Howell, Lieutenant Coughlin and even the not-too-observant Lieutenant Reed had noticed it too.

Howell couldn't put his finger on it, but something was just wrong. Like a bad case of déjà vu that couldn't be shaken. Even back on the last world they'd visited, Howell's sense of premonition had saved a few lives.

They'd been descending a steep hill after making their way through the gate; Coughlin and Reed had been left to guard the gate while Howell and Lorne continued down on foot. Halfway down the mountain, Howell had gotten such a feeling of dread he'd made Lorne stop, and seconds later, dozens of Wraith had leapt up from the underbrush. It was a running fight back up to the gate, which would have ended much worse if not for Howell's sixth sense.

But as they were approaching the gate, a Wraith dart that had come out of no where fired on the gate, sending a few shots into the gate room back on Atlantis, but more importantly, sending enough energy into the gate itself to make the wormhole jump to the nearest gate. Lorne and his team were sent through the second wormhole, and wound up even farther from home than they had been before.

Once they'd reached this new world, Howell had expected his feeling of unease to die down; instead, it got worse.

"Hey Reed! You got a deck of cards or something? This log is practically carved out to be a casino table!" Coughlin pointed out, admiring the smooth top of a fallen log. Howell had noticed it too, and on further inspection, it did look carved.

"That's oddâ€|" Howell said under his breath, kneeling in front of the thing. Coughlin and Reed both took a step back as Howell approached, looking nervous. If Howell thought it was 'odd', it was quite probably lethal or incredibly dangerous.

"You don't think it's going to blow up or something, do you?" Coughlin asked, raising an eyebrow as Howell craned his neck to look

under the log. Coughlin and Reed were both in their mid thirties with short brown hair, lean builds, and whiter-than-marshmallow-fluff complexions. Howell's half Hispanic side was the most exotic thing about the team.

"It's a table, Coughlin, not one of McKay's experiments" Howell said lazily, now crawling completely under the thing. It sat on two ancient, mossy boulders that were half buried in the dirt, while the sides and top of the log seemed far too clean cut.

"Holy cow" Howell said softly. Both Coughlin and Reed jumped back and cocked their weapons, while Lorne came running with his P-90 leveled.

"What is it?" Lorne demanded, trying to see past Howell's outstretched legs. His torso and head were completely under the strange table, and as they watched, he slowly shimmied out from under it.

"Take a look at this." Howell tossed a small, white object at Lorne's feet, which all four men jumped studied carefully.

"That's a deck of cards." Lorne said in shock, kneeling down to get a better look at it. His brow furrowed as he examined the object, while Howell crawled back under the table.

Sure enough, an ancient deck of cards was sitting in the grass at their feet, the paint on the outside of the box peeling off in Lorne's fingers.

"This was under there?" Lorne asked, looking up at the Captain.

"Yes sir. And look what else." Howell jumped up, grabbed the edges of the table, and tipped it over towards them.

Carved into the underside of the now obviously carved wooden surface were five names, and one of them looked familiar.

"Captain Timothy Krag" Lorne read slowly. "Major Bret Jones, Major Jeremiah Bacon, Percial Peabody and" Lorne stopped speaking, reading and re-reading the last name on the list.

"Howell, why's your name on this thing?" Reed demanded, slack-jawed at the sight.

"Better question; why are you a Colonel?" Coughlin looked up at Howell with wonder and a little suspicion, while Howell only shook his head in response.

"I've been here with you the whole time; why would I have more information than you?" Howell snapped, bending down to examine the writing closer. Lorne just kept staring at the names, as if expecting them to disappear any second.

"This is crazy. The writing looks ancient; like it was carved decades ago!" Howell tapped on the writing with his knife-butt, blowing away a layer of moss that had grown nearby.

"This isn't right. This writing is in English and I've seen decks of cards just like these back on Atlantis in the supply room; but it's



too old to have been left here by one of our guys." Lorne walked in circles around the table for a long moment before looking up at the horizon again.

"Let's take another look around; someone must have carved this and I bet they're still around somewhere." Lorne ordered. The three men all followed close behind him, weapons raised, while Howell hesitated only a second longer. The dÃ©jÃ  vu was getting worse and worse, and Howell still had no answers. Him, a Colonel? And which one of those names had carved the strange table in the first place?

They wandered around the woods for an hour, seeing absolutely nothing else out of the ordinary. Reed had suggested that it was a prank designed by one of the other reconnaissance teams, but Lorne pointed out that the DHD being fried made that hard to believe. Not even Sheppard would go that far for a prank.

"So, what are the bets? Reed?" Coughlin asked, pulling out a pen and paper from his vest.

"Total coincidence and the power of suggestion." Reed said thoughtfully, stepping over a large branch in their path.

"Alright, Howell?" Coughlin quickly scratched down the theory on his pad and turned to the large man beside him.

"I don't knowâ€¦ Alternate reality? One where I'm a Colonel you all don't exist?" Howell suggested halfheartedly. He was still scanning the woods, expecting a squadron of Wraith to appear any second.

"Okay, Major?"

They all stopped walking as they waited for Lorne to answer; Reed bumped into Coughlin and both almost fell over a root.

"Down, down!" Lorne dropped to his knees, motioned them to do the same, and raised his weapon again. Howell was already on his stomach and putting his P-90 into single shot mode. He was a deadly shot with the weapon, and hated to burn ammo.

"What is it?" Coughlin asked, peering through a thick fern in front of him.

"In the clearing up there!" Lorne pointed the object out, and Reed whistled quietly at the sight.

"That looks a lot like a Jumper."

He was right. At the edge of the tree line was a Jumper, and even more interestingly, a log cabin. The ramp of the ship was up and the drive pods were retracted, but the distinct silhouette was unmistakable. It was facing away from them, with the front windshield apparently facing the clearing in the distance. The cabin looked very rough and poorly made, but it was still standing despite it's obvious age.

"Coughlin, you're with me! Reed, Howell, stay here and cover us!" Lorne ordered, slowly rising to his feet. Coughlin nodded and joined him, while Reed rolled dramatically behind a boulder to get a better

line of sight.

Slowly and carefully, the two Air Force men made their way towards the jumper, while Howell and Reed waited patiently behind them.

"Pst! Howell!" Reed whispered, still not taking his eyes off of Lorne.

"What?"

"Any more premonitions?"

Howell rolled his jaw around and shook his head. "Not since we left the gate. Wait, look at that!" Howell tensed up and aimed for the top of the ramp as it slowly descended.

"Major! Get down!" Reed shouted and jumped up, now standing as he watched the spectacle unfold.

The ramp creaked and whined as it descended, and when it finally hit the dirt, a man could be seen standing inside. He was tall, African American, and looked incredibly old. He was wearing furs and bits of leather that looked like something Tarzan might have made. Beside him in the Jumper was a long, cigar shaped device that Howell didn't recognize.

Lorne and Coughlin were both in shock at seeing the man, and slowly lowered their weapons. The man wasn't armed, and hardly looked dangerous. If there was anyone in the cabin, they were still inside. Reed had been covering the rough doorway, but now focused on the man beside it.

"Howellâ€¦" The stranger's voice was cracked and dry, as if he hadn't spoken out loud in years. Howell stood up and took a step forward, his weapon still raised.

"That's my name. Who are you?" Howell asked, approaching Lorne. They were still at least ten feet from the edge of the Jumper's ramp, but now Howell could see the man's face clearer. His eyes were old and tired, and he had a beard that ran down to his collarbone.

"You don't recognize me?" The man asked, actually sounding hopeful at the thought. "It workedâ€¦"

Without another word, the man collapsed and rolled down the ramp of the ship. Howell ran forward with the rest of the team close behind, all staring in stark amazement.

"Howellâ€¦ You're alrightâ€¦" The man laughed softly, and it reminded Howell of an old grandfather meeting his grandchildren.

"Do I know you?" Howell asked, wracking his brain for an answer.

"Major Lucas Bane, of the Atlantis expeditionâ€¦" He stopped short and coughed hard for a minute before going on. "â€¦ I was your second in command!"

Howell didn't know what to think of the man, so he didn't think at

all. He filed away the strange claim and kept asking questions. "How did you get here?"

"Theâ€¦ time machineâ€¦" He coughed between words and pointed to the strange device inside the jumper.

"Dang thing brokeâ€¦ fifty years too early!"

Howell started to ask another question, but the man interrupted him. "Shut up for a second! Let me finishâ€¦" He had another coughing fit before going on. "Guess that green crap wasn't tobacco after all. Ruined my lungs, but boy did it smoke good! Look, there's things you need to knowâ€¦" He swallowed hard and closed his eyes, concentrating on his story.

"The machine's broke; it was only a test model. But Howell, the other Howell, must still be out thereâ€¦" He grabbed Captain Howell's arm tightly and stared deep into his eyes. "Do not underestimate him! And there's the Wrathgardâ€¦"

"The what?"

"I said shut up! The Wrathgard! That's what I call 'em, anyway. Half Wraith, half Asgard. It's my fault, but it was the only way. They came here looking for DNA; I fed them a Wraith drone and warned them about the outcome of the war. They're out there now, still looking for the Attero Deviceâ€¦ Buggers still don't know I destroyed the thing. Used the last of my drones, but I did it. Larrin's ship ought to be alright nowâ€¦ Sorry about the DHD; you wouldn't believe what made that holeâ€¦ there's more, in the cabinâ€¦"

Howell was waiting for him to go on, and jumped a little as he realized why he'd stopped. The old man was dead.

## 24. Giant Freaking Bugs

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\* \* \*

**><p>**"Wow, would you look at thisâ€¦" Lorne whistled as he walked through the animal hide curtain of the cabin. Howell was right behind him while Reed and Coughlin checked out the Jumper.**<p>**

The inside of the cabin was dark, damp, and dusty beyond all belief. Major Bane had apparently built it by hand with little to no tools, and it showed. The floor was packed dirt and the 'furniture' was made up of rocks and bits of logs that had been carved and arranged nicely. There was one window that let in some light, which illuminated a small cot in the corner. But the real elephant in the room was the giant mount of what looked like clay tablets sitting in the back of the room. There was a kiln outside, as well as a lot of

other improvised tools and necessities. Rocks and sticks were only so useful.

They'd taken Major Bane's body out into the prairie and dug a grave as best they could; without shovels it was hard work and they ended up piling rocks on top of the shallow grave to mark it's place. No one said any words and there was no ceremony; no one had any clue what \_to\_ say.

"I guess clay tablets are easier to make than reams of paper," Howell stood over the stack of tablets and blew a layer of dust off. There was writing on them; lots of it.

"Can you read it?" Lorne asked, looking through the former resident's 'kitchen'.

"It's in English, but it looks like he wrote it with a sharp stick. His handwriting isn't that great." Howell picked through the tablets, and noticed that some had dates on them as well as long columns of writing. Each tablet was the size of a normal piece of paper, about eight by eleven inches and an inch thick.

"What do they say?" Major Lorne was looking over Howell's shoulder curiously as he read one of them.

"This one's not in order, but I recognized my name. It says, 'Howell grew up in Nevada; he's used to desert climates. Harsh weather won't slow him down. Added to the fact that his family brutally tortured him for years, and you've got a strong individual.'" Howell read slowly. There was much more, but he stopped short as he realized how personal it was to him.

"Is that true?" Lorne asked, obviously intrigued. Howell nodded curtly.

"To a 'T'." He gently placed the tablet back down and glanced over the entire stack in wonder.

"This pile is on me personally. That one over there is on 'my' team; and the last part is all on the Wrathgard, whatever those are." Howell shook his head again, still trying to process it all.

"Tell me you can see it too. Tell me I'm not going crazy and imagining this all." Howell asked weakly, leaning against the cabin wall. The tablets seemed to stare accusingly at him, as if all of this were his fault somehow.

"Well, I can see it too, but I make no promises on the sanity of all of this." Lorne said with a smile. He patted Howell's shoulder. "We'll figure it out."

"Major Lorne?" Coughlin was heard outside the cabin, sounding excited.

Both Lorne and Howell went out to see what the problem was, Howell beyond anxious to be free of the tiny cabin. Coughlin was standing on the edge of the Jumper's ramp, the setting sun behind him fairly blinding them to what he was holding in his hand.

"What is it?"

"A flash drive, sir! We found it in the Jumper with a Traveler gun!" Coughlin led them up into the Jumper, ducking around the machine sitting in the rear compartment.

"A Traveler gun?" Lorne demanded, walking up to Reed who was sitting in the pilot's seat.

"Yes sir. Dead, unfortunately, but the Jumper sure isn't. The DHD should work fine!" Reed said with a grin. Lorne slapped him on the back and grinned, glad to finally hear some good news.

"Good work! We're going home, boys. Howell?" He turned around to see Captain Howell still standing on the ramp, staring at the cabin beside them.

"We can't leave it, sir." Howell said softly. Major Lorne walked over to him and nodded slowly.

"We'll send someone back for it. For now I think we should let Atlantis know we're still alive."

Howell narrowed his eyes and looked at the cabin one last time before hitting the command to raise the ramp.

"Alright, let's get moving. Reed, get out of my chair." Lorne said good naturedly. He sat down at the pilot's chair, while Reed and Coughlin took the back two seats. Howell slowly made his way to the 'shotgun' seat and nodded to Lorne.

The Jumper gave off its trademark hum as Lorne activated it, and slowly the little ship rose from the ground.

"I wonder why that other guy didn't leave. Obviously the Jumper still flies!" Reed asked, leaning on Howell's chair to get a better look out the windshield.

"Maybe he didn't have the gene. Or maybe he felt he needed to stay here." Howell suggested, staring at the spot out in the prairie where Bane now lay.

"Approaching the gate now; dial it up Captain." Lorne ordered, ducking and weaving between the massive trees. Howell dialed in Atlantis' address and hit the center button.

But as the Jumper approached the gate, nothing happened. The wormhole didn't open and the gate didn't respond.

"It didn't work!" Howell said in shock, hastily dialing the address again. The second time didn't activate it either.

"That's not good. Try another address; maybe Atlantis is busy." Lorne ordered, still staying calm.

Howell wracked his brain for another safe address, and ended up dialing New Athos. This time, the gate activated and the wormhole opened.

"Okay!" I guess Atlantis had a connection going already. Try dialing it again."

Howell was already dialing as Lorne spoke and hit the button with a little more determination this time. They all held their breaths as he hit it, and all let out a collective sigh as nothing happened.

"Great. Just great." Lorne set the Jumper down right in front of the gate, but a safe distance away from where the vortex would form, and powered it down.

"We'll give it an hour and try again; who knows what's going on. If we still can't get through, we'll try New Athos again. Maybe they know something we don't." Lorne said in a resigned tone. He stood up from the pilot's seat and turned to Howell.

"Let's go look at those tablets again."

\* \* \*

><p>Major Lorne and Lieutenant Reed went to scout the surrounding prairie while Captain Howell and Lieutenant Coughlin worked on the huge library Bane had left behind. They'd found a map drawn out on an animal hide that Lorne had taken with them, and they'd headed for a site marked down as 'supply dump'. The sunset on that world was incredibly slow; there was still a dying light in the sky as they went.<p>

Howell had borrowed Reed's computer tablet the two Marines were slowly typing out the different clay tablets into a document. Howell read them and Coughlin typed it out as they waited for Lorne and Reed to come back.

They'd started with the stack designated as 'Wrathgard' and gone forward.

"During the war of the Ancients, a group of Asgard determined to carry out experiments on human populations were banished from the rest of the Asgard civilization. They came to Pegasus hoping that the war between the Ancients and Wraith would mask their operations." Howell read out loud. Coughlin finished typing it up and looked up at Howell strangely.

"If that's true, I wonder why we haven't encountered them yet."

"I don't know. Bane said a few things that didn't make sense before he died; he mentioned that the Wrathgard were his fault. Maybe he influenced all of this with his time machine?" Howell suggested. They'd thought about trying to use the machine, but Bane had said it was dead and further experimentation proved it. The machine was now just a large paperweight until someone like McKay could take it apart and fix it.

"These Asgard came in three massive, intergalactic ships of the same kind that SG-1 first encountered many years ago on the planet Cimmeria."

"Oh, I remember that one! That Viking place with Thor's hammerâ€|"

"Stop interrupting!" Howell snapped. Coughlin snorted and went

quiet.

"I, Major Lucas Bane, with the help of the experimental time machine found on the Traveler's second home-worldâ€¦" Howell shot Coughlin a death look as he started to ask another question.

"â€¦decided this was the place to start in changing history for the better. This was the focal point that led to the destruction of the Traveler fleet, several Stargates, and the deaths of countless thousands. Not to mention the complete evacuation of the humans of the Pegasus galaxy." Howell couldn't believe the words he was reading, but kept going anyway.

"I appeared in space at the edge of the galaxy, right as the Asgard dropped out of hyperspace. How I ended up here I do not know; this version of the time machine seems to have incorporated a model of the Wormhole Drive that Doctor Zelenka used to take Atlantis to Earthâ€¦" Howell stopped here and his head shot up. Coughlin caught on in a second, and both men locked eyes.

"What if Bane wasn't able to change everything that happened in his timeline?" Coughlin asked quickly.

"You mean what if Atlantis left Pegasus in this timeline too?" Howell said with a nervous swallow.

"Major Lorne, this is Captain Howell; do you read?" Howell fairly ripped his radio off of his vest to talk into it, his stomach twisting into a knot as he spoke.

"Howell? Where are you?" Lieutenant Reed's frantic voice came over the radio, and both men in the cabin tensed up even more.

"Back at the cabin; what's going on?"

"Giant freaking bugs! They're everywhere!" Reed screamed. Coughlin jumped up and pulled his P-90 to his shoulder.

"Wait, I just saw that!" Howell scrambled over to the far side of the tablet pile and quickly scanned the ones on top. He found the one he was looking for and almost broke it in half as he snatched it up.

"â€¦flying insects the size of horses roam in the southern lands. They spit acid as a defense mechanism and are apparently related to the Iratus bugâ€¦" Howell read as fast as he could.

"How do you kill them?" Coughlin demanded as more screams came over the radio.

"â€¦though covered in almost impenetrable scales, the insects seem to fire smokeâ€¦ Smoke! They fear smoke!" Howell shouted, yelling the last part into the radio.

"That's really helpful Howell!" Reed yelled. "We're heading for the Jumper now!"

"Let's go; we'll meet them halfway!" Coughlin was already out the door as he spoke and Howell was right behind him. It annoyed him again that they'd have to leave the tablets behind; he was only

finding more and more questions as he went on.

The two men sprinted from the cabin in the clearing to the gate where they'd left the ship, the radio ominously silent. As soon as they hit the ramp, Howell leapt over the broken time machine and made it into the pilot's chair in another bound. Coughlin stood by the ramp with his gun ready, but didn't close it.

"Hold on, I'm taking us up!" Howell warned, powering up the ship as he spoke.

"You ever flown one of these, Captain?"

"Nope. Should be interesting." Howell said with a nervous grin. He got the little ship into the air, and started back up through the trees.

"I can't see anything; tell me if we're about to hit something!" Howell shouted.

"We're about to hit something!"

Howell slammed on the brakes and turned around to glare at Coughlin, who'd almost fallen out of the Jumper.

"Right or left genius!"

"Oh, uh, right! I mean your left! Left!" Coughlin sputtered.

"Try 'port' or 'starboard'!" Howell suggested, slowly moving backward again.

"Port! More to the port! Back to the starboard a little! Port now! Port port port!"

Major Lorne and Lieutenant Reed were sprinting at top speed as their pursuers buzzed overhead. Lorne was sporadically firing his P-90, but Reed had dropped his weapon a half mile back. The insects they'd unknowingly awoken weren't much smaller than horses, with wing spans as long as their bodies and long proboscis' that kept spitting acid out at the two fleeing men. A tree had been hit by one stream of yellow fluid, and a second later it toppled to the ground; the trunk had been eaten through by the acid in seconds!

Lorne and Reed were both convinced that they weren't going to make it, and were seriously wishing they'd taken the Jumper on their scouting mission. The supply dump had been a bust; the only thing of value inside was some dried meat and berries as well as some stone knives and scraps of leather.

Lorne's heart was pounding in his ears as he ran, his breath coming in gasps. They'd already run two miles in full gear and had a long ways to go, if they managed to keep ahead of the swarm of massive insects behind them. Another blast of yellow goop hit a patch of grass beside Reed, who had to duck out of the way at the last second.

"Where are Howell and Coughlin?" Lorne yelled, scanning the horizon desperately.



"I don't know!" Reed screamed in a high pitched tone. Reed hated bugs, and the monsters behind them weren't helping that phobia.

"What's that?" Reed demanded, pointing ahead of them. Lorne couldn't believe his eyes.

The Jumper was flying at top speed backwards out of the tree line, with the ramp down and Coughlin hanging out of the back! It flew straight towards them, and when they were close enough Coughlin opened fire on the swarm.

One of the massive bugs had its wings clipped, and it tumbled to the ground with one last glob of acid shooting out as it fell. The ship ducked lower, Lorne and Reed jumped, and the ramp started to pull itself up as Howell again slammed on the brakes.

All three men tumbled over the time machine and into the back as Howell shouted,

"Hold on!" He drove the handles forward and they could feel the drive pods hum to life as Howell took off like a shot. The swarm of bugs was left behind as Howell flew straight up and into the atmosphere, the inertial dampeners coming on automatically to prevent the four men from becoming stains on the rear door.

The strange, greenish sky melted away as stars appeared, and Howell leveled them out into a stable orbit.

"Do you think that's a good idea? Taking us into space? This thing is like fifty years old!" Reed objected, climbing free of the tangle of arms and legs.

"Try ten thousand and fifty years old, and yes, I'm aware. But I doubt those bugs are space worthy, so here we are." Howell snapped. Lorne finally righted himself and made it to the front of the Jumper, taking over the controls as Howell stepped aside.

"You did great, Howell. Now let's get-" He stopped mid-sentence as a hyper-space window opened almost on top of them. Lorne whipped the Jumper to one side as a ship appeared a second later and almost crushed them.

"What was that?" Coughlin demanded, staring out the windshield at the massive ship beside them.

"Looks to me like a Traveler ship." Howell said knowingly. He'd gotten only a second to look at the ship, but somehow he knew. It was a Traveler ship alright, but how and why they had shown up was still a mystery.

"This is Captain Katana Labrea of the Travelers." A radio call came into the Jumper's communications array, and seconds later a beautiful woman appeared on the HUD.

"This is Major Lorne of the Atlantis Expedition. You almost smashed us into a million pieces back there!" He snapped somewhat angrily. Katana only smiled.

"Sorry about that. We picked you guys up on one of our spy satellites

and couldn't help but be curious. What's your team still doing here?" She asked sincerely. Howell raised an eyebrow and turned to Lorne.

"What do you mean by that?" Howell asked, his earlier fears about Bane's Atlantis resurfacing.

"Atlantis is gone; it left this galaxy yesterday."

## 25. Do Not Underestimate Him

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\* \* \*

><p>"What do you mean Atlantis isâ€|" Major Lorne started to ask. Before he could finish, Howell shot out a hand and shut off the HUD.<p>

"Sir, Coughlin and I found something down on the planet." Howell explained quickly, cringing slightly at Lorne's annoyed look.

"So did we Captain. Giant, flying insects that tried to eat us. Did the tablets mention those?" Reed demanded, sounding completely fed up.

"Yes, as a matter of fact they did. But we also found something on the Atlantis of Major Bane's time line. It said that Doctor Zelenka used something called a Wormhole Drive to take Atlantis to the Milky Way galaxy. Coughlin and I were about to radio you with that intel when we heard the screams." Howell shot a nervous glance out at the giant Traveler ship still hovering nearby and tried to get his point across faster.

"What I'm trying to say, sir, is that we might want to watch what we tell these people and when. Atlantis may have left this galaxy in this time line, too."

"Obviously it has if this Captain Labrea said it did." Major Lorne reasoned. "Look, I don't like them either, but we don't have much choice but to trust them. For now. They have more information than us."

Howell nodded respectfully, but still had the strange urge to fly their little ship as far away from the Travelers as possible.

Lorne brought up the communications system again, and a slightly peeved Katana Labrea was still waiting.

"Sorry about that; communications problem." Lorne explained. It wasn't technically a lie. "We're aware that Atlantis isn't in this galaxy anymore; we were left behind by mistake. Maybe we could

discuss this in person?" Lorne asked hopefully.

Labrea smiled a little and nodded knowingly. "I look forward to it. This must be one interesting story. I'm sending over docking coordinates now."

The image disappeared and a set of numeric coordinates appeared in its place. Lorne shook his head and sighed, already thinking twice about the decision.

"They are our allies. We wouldn't have been able to destroy the Replicator home-world without them." Coughlin reminded him.

"They're also led by the woman who kidnapped and tortured Colonel Sheppard. If he doesn't trust them, should we?" Howell demanded, thinking back to the mission report he'd read. Colonel Sheppard was a fearless leader and a strong fighter; if the Travelers had captured him, they'd probably eat Lorne and his team alive.

"I'd agree with you, Captain, if this was Larrin we were dealing with. Maybe she's the exception and the rest of the Travelers are nice, decent people." Lorne suggested as he flew under the Traveler ship to the bay they'd indicated. All four men were silent as he brought them up and into the belly of the beast.

"With all due respect, sir, maybe Santa is real and unicorns fart rainbows." Howell said seriously. Reed and Coughlin both cracked up laughing, while Lorne grimaced.

"I think I'd prefer to deal with the unicorns right nowâ€¦!"

The four men were escorted through the corridors of the Traveler ship by two armed men. Howell was glad they hadn't been stunned, knocked unconscious, or tied up by now. They'd already done better than Sheppard.

The Traveler ship was actually nicer than Howell was expecting. Sheppard had described a run down vessel with wires and conduits exposed everywhere; the ship they'd boarded looked fresh off of the assembly line. Or at the very least fresh out of a pit stop.

"Captain Labrea will see you in here." The first guard, a giant, dark skinned man in his forties, opened a door for them and motioned them inside. The other guard was still behind the group, his hand dangerously near his side arm.

"Thank you." Major Lorne nodded respectfully at the man and walked boldly through the door, with the rest of his men following suit.

Inside of the room was a long table that ran the length of the small chamber; seated at the far end was the woman they'd seen on the HUD. The hologram didn't do her justice; this woman was gorgeous. Her tanned skin was practically glowing, her long dark hair was braided tightly behind her, and her cat-like smile seemed more than a little predatory. Her large dark eyes studied each man in turn as they entered, seeming to pause slightly on Howell.

"My name is Major Lorne. This is Lieutenant Reed," He nodded at Reed,

who was still staring uncomfortably at Labrea. "Lieutenant Coughlin," Coughlin was smiling stupidly in what must have been some attempt at flirting. "and Captain Howell."

Howell and Lorne weren't quite as smitten by the woman, but Reed and Coughlin were goners.

"My name is Katana Labrea, but I already told you that." She said with a smile. She stood up and approached them slowly, arms folded in front of her.

"So, why is it that four Atlanteans are still here when the rest of fleet is already gone?"

"That's complicated." Lorne answered simply.

"Sounds like it. Sit down; are you guys hungry?" She deftly spun a chair around and sat down, nodding a bowl of fresh fruits on the table. Again Howell was confused; the last time Sheppard had encountered them he was forced to eat processed and preserved food. The apple-like fruit in front of them looked like it was picked yesterday.

"Starved, actually!" Coughlin said in a strange voice. He slid down into another chair and snatched up one of the fruits, taking a large bite out of it as he did so.

Katana watched him carefully, her smile getting even wider as the look on Coughlin's face turned sour.

"You're supposed to peel it first. The skin is pretty bitter." Katana whipped out a small knife and started peeling another one out of the bowl, going slowly as if to show the Airman how it was done.

Coughlin nodded and swallowed hard, his face turning pale as he choked it down. "Makes sense" He grunted.

Reed sat down next to him, staring at his folded hands now while Lorne and Howell sat across from Katana. She was full of questions, which the men did their best to answer.

"So what happened to you four?"

"We went off world on a reconnaissance mission and were attacked by the Wraith. They must have had some sort of hidden base on the planet we weren't aware of." Lorne started, refraining from eating anything. Howell was personally waiting to see if the things were drugged before he dug in; Katana had peeled but not eaten hers.

"The Wraith fired on the gate we were going back through, and the wormhole jumped to this planet. We've been here about a day now."

"Why didn't you go back to Atlantis immediately?" Katana asked, kicking her boots up onto the table. She was wearing skin tight leather pants with her similarly tight jacket, and Reed inhaled sharply. Howell kicked him under the table and he went silent.

"DHD was busted. Apparently a giant insect ate half of it." Howell

explained, putting two and two together. He doubted Bane would have done the damage himself, and the bugs were the only other things on the planet capable of the feat.

"But you had a Jumper." Katana reminded them. Lorne and Howell shot sideways glances at each other, both wondering how much they would have to tell her.

"We found it on the planet, abandoned by someone else. We tried dialing Atlantis but couldn't get through. If they were traveling through space at the time, it would explain why we couldn't make a connection." Lorne answered. Howell was impressed; again, he hadn't actually lied.

"Sounds like you all have had one heck of a day." Katana remarked casually. Coughlin nodded absentmindedly until Howell kicked him, at which point he absentmindedly shook his head. Howell rolled his eyes and gave up.

"If we could use your communications array to contact one of our ships, we'd greatly appreciate it. We'll be out of your hair as soon as they pick us up." Lorne suggested mildly. He folded his hands on the table and sat up straight in his chair; he looked like he was trying to negotiate a deal with a hard bargainer.

"Sorry. All of your ships left shortly after Atlantis did. It looked like there was some sort of battle and they all limped home." Katana dropped her feet off of the table and mimicked Lorne's pose.

"You don't like me very much, do you?" She demanded. Lorne looked like he was at a loss for words, so Howell opened his mouth instead.

"Not really. For one thing, you're kind of hard to look at."

Reed cringed, Coughlin choked, and Lorne looked mildly amused. He knew Howell's twisted sense of humor and was expecting something like that sooner or later. But it was Katana everyone was watching.

She whirled around to look Howell in the eye, for a moment seeming deadly serious. But all at once, her grin returned and she softened up.

"I like you. You're funny."

"What? Oh, yes, I was kidding of course." Howell said as sincerely as he could. Lorne cleared his throat and tried to steer the conversation back to reality.

"If our ships are gone, they'll be back soon. Our absence will be noticed." Lorne assured her. All at once Coughlin dropped his 'flirtatious' look, if it could be called that, and broke out in a cold sweat. He shot Howell an 'oh crap' look.

"Um, Captain, could I speak to you privately?" Coughlin asked Howell under his breath. Howell tried and failed to figure out what had set Coughlin off before nodding and standing up.

"We'll be back." Howell said shortly, half dragging Coughlin out into the corridor. As soon as the door was shut, the man practically

exploded.

"Lorne isn't supposed to be here!" Coughlin spoke so quickly Howell could barely follow him. "I read one of those other clay tablets when we first came in and it said Bane heard Sheppard say that Lorne was with Ronon and Teyla onboard the super-hive whatever that is and Lorne was in the Milky Way with Atlantis and hi there Major!" Coughlin finally took a breath and turned to see Major Lorne stepping through the door after them.

"What's wrong?" Lorne asked Howell, giving Coughlin a strange look. Howell took a deep breath and thought for a moment.

"Problems in the time stream. Bane changed even more than we thought, somehow." Howell answered.

"Does it affect our ships ability to come back for us?" Lorne asked skeptically. Coughlin and Howell exchanged looks.

"I don't think so, sir. It all depends on what's happening in \_this\_ time line."

Lorne rolled his eyes and nodded. "Doesn't it always. Get back in here and calm down!" He snapped, mostly to Coughlin. The three men stepped back into the room where Katana was apparently in a staring contest with Reed.

"Problems?" Katana asked, still not breaking her stare.

Lorne looked torn as to which way he should go, and Howell tried to conspicuously shake his head. Lorne sighed and went on.

"Yes. A lot. How familiar are you with time travel?"

\* \* \*

><p>An hour later, the entire story was out. Katana, to her credit, had listened to the entire thing and all of their extrapolations without interrupting once. When Lorne and Howell were done, she raised her eyebrows and nodded slowly.<p>

"So, Atlantis is gone, and so are your ships." She said to herself.

"You know that better than we do." Howell said as patiently as possible.

"And you're stranded here without a ZPM to power the gate trip home."

"Actually, the DHD in Atlantis is specifically designed for dialing earth. It won't work with any other gate, ZPM or not." Lorne explained.

"Which leaves you here, on my ship, until someone notices you're gone and comes back for you." Katana summed up.

"That's the bottom line, yeah." Howell studied her carefully, trying to decipher her train of thought. She was totally unreadable, and still messing with Reed and Coughlin whenever she could. At the

moment, she was playing with the buttons on her jacket.

"Plus there's this situation with the hoard of information on a timeline that no longer exists, supposedly."

Howell detected some skepticism in her voice and started to lose his temper. "Actually, before he died, this man who claimed to have been my friend wrote down both the events of his time line, and the ones he'd influenced in ours. We were going over a section talking about a race of Asgard that came to this galaxy ten thousand years ago and that's still here to this day. Bane, the author of all these tablets, called them the Wrathgard."

"Alright, I believe you." Katana said suddenly. Howell and Lorne were both surprised at that.

"And we are technically allies. You helped repair our Ancient warship and Sheppard's advice on starting a land colony worked out well. We helped you fight the Replicators, which leaves us still owing you guys one. What do you want from us?" Katana asked, being serious for the first time since they'd met her. Lorne relaxed noticeably and started to smile.

"A place to stay until our people come back for us. Four beds and a few meals; we'll earn our keep."

"Sounds like a deal. I'll let Larrin know we're bringing home company." Katana said, starting to stand up. Howell stopped her with one last question.

"Does your world have a gate on it?"

"Of course. We use it for trade." Katana had her hand on the door, looking back at Howell as she spoke.

"Good. We'll be wanting to come back here for the rest of Bane's things." Lorne finished, guessing Howell's train of thought.

"No problem. If there's nothing else, I'll be on the bridge. You're my guests, so you have the run of the ship. Try not to break anything though; we just got this old girl back into shape." Katana lovingly patted the bulkhead beside her and disappeared into the corridor beyond. The door swung shut and the four men were left alone.

"Why does she keep flirting with us?" Reed demanded uncomfortably. Howell smirked and shook his head.

"She's trying to get your skin, and it's working."

"Is that Traveler thing?" Coughlin asked, still looking at the spot where Katana had been standing.

"Nope, that's a woman thing. Get used to it." Lorne laughed knowingly and shook his head at their antics.

Reed and Coughlin went on for a while, discussing Travelers, Captains, and women in general, while Howell tuned them out. His own train of thought was a little more complicated. Lorne could tell he was brooding about something, but said nothing as he watched his second in command.

One line out of all the rest was sticking with Howell. What Bane had said right before he died.

"But Howell, the other Howell, must still be out thereâ€¦ Do not underestimate him!"

## 26. Shadow Self

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\* \* \*

><p>The trip to the Traveler home-world wasn't more than a few hours long. The four men were shown to a large bunkroom where Lorne, Reed and Coughlin promptly fell asleep. Howell didn't even attempt it; sleep never came easily to him when he was in his own bed. On a strange ship with Reed snoring above him and other Travelers coming and going during shift changes, Howell wouldn't have slept if he'd been shot with a tranquilizer dart.<p>

There were still so many questions in Howell's mind; he couldn't even pick the biggest one. The most pressing was the feeling of dÃ©jÃ  vu that would not let him rest. He recognized Katana, though he didn't know how. He knew his way around the ship, but kept expecting to see a rusty, broken down vessel in need of repair. Instead all of the walls were freshly painted, there were no wires or pipes sticking out at odd angles, and the hum of the ship's engines sounded downright healthy. It didn't make sense to Howell. It was like he was remembering things that hadn't happenedâ€¦

All at once as he was lying on the stiff cot, it came to him. Somehow, he was remembering the first time. The first time 'he' had been here. The first time 'he' had met this Captain Katana. No one else seemed to notice it; the feeling of being watched was gone now that Bane had been discovered. And it wasn't scientifically plausibly. Doctor Weir had another self that stayed in an Atlantian stasis pod for thousands of years; she never experienced this. Or did she?

He'd never met the woman, and she did have a lot of other things to worry about at the time. Maybe she had been plagued by the unsettling feelings Howell had racing through his head. Plus, the 'other' Weir had been in a stasis tube asleep before dying of old age days later. The other Howell was still alive and well, somewhere out there. Plus, the events the Howells had changed were much more up front and personal; all the other Weir had accomplished was a failsafe measure. The jitters of exploring a new city in another galaxy might easily explain away any dÃ©jÃ  vu type feelings she would have gotten.

Howell puzzled over the logic and scientific validity of all of it



for over an hour. At the end of it he was still no closer to figuring it all out. He was John Howell, a Captain in the U.S. Air Force. He was also John Howell, Colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps. He had the utmost respect for Major Lorne and Colonel Sheppard. The other Howell, from a glance at one of the tablets in Bane's cabin, had hated both men with a passion. They were polar opposites.

"Rise and shine. We've arrived at Vetarel." A Traveler woman was standing in the doorway of the bunks, her tone harsh and sarcastic for some reason. She was about average height with well toned muscles and a hard expression.

"I'm sorry, have we have offended you?" Coughlin asked sweetly as he rolled out of bed. She raised an eyebrow and glared at him.

"You're in my bed."

"There was room for two, sweetie!" Coughlin said with a grin. Howell kicked him in the crotch as he stood up, and Coughlin sank to the floor. His face turned red and his eyes bugged out while the woman at the door smiled.

"Thank you for the update. Is Captain Labrea expecting us?" Lorne asked as he straightened his uniform. The woman shrugged in response.

"Maybe. All she said was 'go wake up the three ugly soldiers, and the good looking one too.'"

\* \* \*

><p>Whether expected or not, the four Airmen made their way to the bridge as quickly as possible. Other Travelers were hurrying past them in the corridors, making preparations for something the four weren't aware of.<p>

When they finally made it to the bridge, Captain Labrea was waiting by the door for them.

"Oh good, you're here. I wanted to show you something." She motioned them inside after a quick smile at Howell, which he didn't return. Lorne led the way into the somewhat cramped bridge and they saw what the big deal was.

It surprised Howell for some reason, but this Traveler ship had a window on the bridge. He couldn't remember if others had it or not; he figured it might have been upgrade for this ship in particular. In any case, the front wall of the bridge was one giant window, and the two crewmembers flying the ship were focused intently on it.

Miles below them was a planet, and the ship seemed to be descending towards it rapidly. Its atmosphere was a clear blue not unlike Earth's, with a vast ocean visible on the horizon. The ground below them was covered in trees and mountains, but in one valley a city had sprung up. Howell guessed that they were headed towards it, and the angle of the ship's descent seemed to confirm that.

"This is Vetarel. Our new home." Katana said proudly, leaning against one wall for a better view. Lorne and his team tried to stay out of the way as they took in the breathtaking view.

"When Admiral Larrin first encountered Colonel Sheppard, he suggested that we lay down roots and stand with them against the Wraith. Larrin took his advice, and proposed the plan to our ruling council. After a lot of debate, we chose this world to settle down on." Katana explained. The ship was still descending, and the city was a lot clearer now.

Howell could see ten distinct districts, each one centered around a landing pad. A few ships weren't currently occupying their spaces, but most were down and buzzing with activity. The Ancient warship was in the middle of the city, with infrastructure seeming to grow directly out of it.

"We have a Stargate on the edge of the city, fields and farms in another valley we access via underground trams and a new shipyard in yet another valley. This planet is incredibly mountainous, but the valleys are pristine and ready to be colonized." Katana practically purred. She was proud of her people's work, and she had the right to be. The city below them was larger than some of the cities Howell had seen on Earth; at least the size of Carson back in Nevada.

"Very impressive." Lorne commented, still studying the massive structures.

"We'll be setting down there," Katana pointed to a landing pad farther out from the Ancient vessel. "and Admiral Larrin is anxious to meet you. She has a lot of questions, and I'm sure you'll have a few before long."

"I have one already. I thought Larrin was a Captain." Howell half asked, half stated. He was sure of that, though he didn't know why.

"She got a promotion recently; she now oversees all fleet operations from the Ancient vessel."

The ship ever so gently made it down to the pad, and there was a soft 'thud' as it impacted. Crews raced around the outside of the ship to secure it as cargo bay doors opened on the lower levels.

"One last thing; don't get lost. Vetarel is a big place, and outside of our valleys, there a lot of ways to get into trouble." Katana warned. "I have a feeling you guys can handle yourselves, but I have to say it. We've had trouble with the wildlife lately and I don't want to see anyone else get eaten."

All four of the Airmen exchanged concerned looks, but said nothing. Captain Labrea led them off the bridge and into their new home, still smiling occasionally at Howell.

\* \* \*

><p>Four hours later, Lorne and his team met in the 'restaurant' outside of Katana's ship. The Travelers had their own form of currency that seemed incredibly confusing to the military men, but Katana assured them that they could eat for free in her town. The exact name for it was 'Hangar 7', but they all knew it as Katana's place.<p>

"So, what do you all think?" Lorne asked quietly as they sat down. The table was a rough wooden one in the back of the open restaurant; there were no walls to let in the cooling breeze from outside.

"Pretty nice; the people are friendly and the city is easy to navigate." Coughlin said simply, smiling at a waitress that was passing by.

"I was told the ocean nearby is filled with creatures that sound like a cross between a shark and an octopus. I don't recommend we go swimming." Reed shivered a little at the mental image that came to mind. Lorne looked at Howell, who was checking the load on his P-90's clip.

"What about you, Howell?"

"The surrounding city has a civilian population of six thousand; fifteen hundred of which are new refugees that arrived within the month. The city itself is run on geothermal power which seems prevalent in the area. The tallest structure is the communications tower in the south sector at what amounts to ten stories; most buildings are subterranean in nature."

"The farmlands to the west are producing more than enough food for the present level of population and more land is being developed as we speak. The valley to the east is comprised of factories and dry docks; most of the manufacturing done on Vetarel is done there. There are a total of three ships being built with room for two more; these ships are less than forty percent complete."

"Defenses are minimal and rely mostly on aerial supremacy; Traveler ships are running patrols in orbit on a fixed schedule. The Stargate has its own complex and is well defended; they use an interesting iris system which involves rotating the gate ninety degrees so that it faces down, into a metal plate. No one is forcing their way in or out of the facility, sir." Howell finished, popping the clip back into his weapon.

Reed and Coughlin looked embarrassed at their own reports while Lorne looked amused.

"That's what I was waiting for. Just try not to do anything that would anger our hosts; for the time being, we are stuck here." Lorne reminded him. Howell nodded respectfully and clipped his weapon back onto his vest.

"Admiral Larrin said she would meet us here at sundown; that can't be too far off now." Lorne looked over his shoulder at the setting sun, noticing the beautiful view at every angle. The sun sinking on the horizon lit up the sky and illuminated a thick forest on the mountain tops nearby.

"Man, I wish had some paintâ€¦ That is a perfect view!" Lorne said quietly.

"Hangar 2, north side. They mostly sell industrial materials but I saw a few artists stocking up there. They have easels, brushes, and of course paint in a surprising variety." Howell rattled off. Reed looked impressed.

"You memorized the city layout?"

"Didn't you?"

"Hello there." They all turned as a feminine voice came from behind Howell.

"My name is Larrin. I understand you're all from Atlantis?" Larrin was indeed standing a few feet behind Howell, dressed in her usual black leather. Her brown hair was hanging loose around her shoulders and her pale white skin was painted almost gold in the dying light of the sun behind them. She squinted against the light and pulled up a chair, sitting down at their table like she was an old friend.

"Yes ma'am. Captain Labrea filled you in?" Lorne asked.

"Somewhat, but I wanted to see you for myself." Larrin looked carefully at each man in turn, sizing them up. Finally, her brown eyes rested on Howell, and all of a sudden he tensed up.

His gut clenched, his knuckles went white as he gripped his leg, and he broke out in a cold sweat. He felt like screaming and had to force himself not to shake. Larrin cocked her head as she noticed the change, and Howell quickly stood up.

"I'm not feeling well. I'm going for a walk." He spit out the words as fast as he could and practically ran from the restaurant. He could feel the eyes of his friends on his back, but he didn't care.

Her eyes. Her face. Her voice. Even the smell of her perfume. It was like an allergic reaction to him and he couldn't control it. He walked and then ran down the streets of the city, trying desperately to clear his head. Over and over again, he saw the image of her in his head, and he couldn't think of anything else.

\* \* \*

><p>Little did he know, flying only a few yards away, another Timejumper was chasing him. It was cloaked, of course; Colonel Howell didn't want to be seen.<p>

"Come on my shadow self! I didn't get a second chance; don't blow yours!"

His grin would have scared a man to death if there was anyone to see it. He'd been busy; searching space and time for all the regents for his master plan. Valkerie wasn't dead; oh no, not at all. It was just delayed slightly. And this new Howell that Bane had so foolishly created wasn't going to stop him. He'd use him, mold him, into the man he always wanted to be.

It took far too long for Howell's taste for that kidnapped scientist to perfect the EM generator the Wraith had abandoned, but then again, what was time to Colonel Howell? He had all the time in the universe now. With the new generator in the seat next to him, Howell broadcast his thoughts again and again into his other self's mind.

"Larrin, you little brat, you're going back to \_Larrin\_!" He had to fly around another building as Captain Howell took a corner suddenly,

but still managed to stay in range.

"I'll get you, brother. I'll make you into the man we want us to be!" He cackled insanely as he flew, zooming off into the night after the desperate man below him.

## 27. Get a move on, Johnny

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**><p>**Howell didn't sleep that night, either. He wound up on a small ledge halfway up a nearby mountain, sitting on a boulder as he watched the sunrise. The trees reminded him of pines; the scent of the needles on the ocean breeze was incredibly refreshing.**<p>**

He was absolutely humiliated after his actions the night before. Whatever had come over him was gone now; Larrin no longer stared back at him whenever he closed his eyes. He kept going over it and over it, hoping that somehow it was just a dream and none of it had actually happened. But no such luck.

Major Lorne had radioed him an hour after he'd taken off, and thankfully he'd been lucid enough to answer. He'd assured the Major that he was alright, just feeling sick and needing air. Lorne hadn't bought it, but what else was he going to explain over an open air radio call?

He didn't know what to do or say. He felt like a child that had run away from a field trip and was now lost. He'd done that once; it had taken his dad an hour to find him, and he hadn't been able to sit down without cringing for a week afterwards. He'd never wandered away from a group again.

He was absentmindedly taking his sidearm apart, unloading and reloading the clip and then putting it back together again. It was an old habit, and he was so adept at the art now that he didn't even have to watch. It was like tying his shoelaces; he could and often did do it blindfolded.

"Wow. You're pretty good with that thing."

Howell jumped a little as the voice from the previous night again came out of no where. Larrin walked up from behind him and leaned against a tree nearby, admiring his skill with the weapon. He quickly finished the routine and tucked it back in his holster, not making eye contact with her.

"Thanks."

"So, is it me? Am I really that ugly?" Larrin asked casually, smiling

a little as she caught his eye. Howell blushed and shook his head, at a loss for words.

"That wasn't it."

"My but you're talkative!" Larrin said sarcastically, looking out at the ocean below them. The mountain was steep all the way to the breakers below; there was no noticeable beach for miles.

"I'm sorry if I appeared rude. I needed a minute." Howell tried, sounding more pathetic than he'd wanted to.

"It's alright. Usually men run towards me, but I'm always up for something new. Major Lorne filled me in on some things." Larrin said knowingly, glancing sideways at him. Howell stood up to face her, arms folded and expression cold.

"Like how there was an evil version of me running around the galaxy with a time machine and an invisible space ship? Or how a former friend used another time machine to influence alien species ten thousand years ago? What exactly did Major Lorne explain and how much sense did it really make? Because personally, I'm still lost, and I was there for most of it." Howell snapped.

"Whoa, calm down tiger!" Larrin held up her hands as if to surrender, her catlike smile still present. "I know you've got issues that followed you a lot longer than they should have. And I know you've got questions that won't have nice and simple answers. Nothing new there."

Larrin stepped away from the tree and got closer to Howell, but not uncomfortably so.

"If it makes you feel any better, I already authorized the rest of your team to go and recover the rest of the tablets this 'Major Bane' left behind. They're leaving in a few minutes."

Howell's head snapped up and he started to walk away, angry that Lorne hadn't told him about the mission sooner.

"Hold on!" Larrin grabbed his arm with surprising force, and to avoid jerking her over, Howell politely stopped walking. His temper flared again as he saw the patronizing look in her eye.

"You authorized my team to go off-world? Why thank you, we definitely needed the permission. Now let go of me so I can join them!"

"Actually, you did. My planet, my gate, my rules. You should be glad I'm on your side; I could make your life very difficult if I wanted to." Larrin's voice took on a new edge, one that demanded respect. It was new to Howell, but like everything else about her, not surprising. His feeling of *dã©jã vu*, or *dã©jã screwed*, as it normally went, was on break for the moment.

"Why do I get the feeling I'm not going on the field trip?" Howell asked sarcastically.

"Because you aren't. For three reasons; one, I want one of my people to go along and see how your people operate. We're getting our own

Stargate teams up and running soon and we're curious to see how yours works. Two, I want you here until I figure you out." Larrin finally let him go and looked him up and down, as if sizing him up. He could practically feel her eyes carving into him.

"Don't hold your breath. I'm not exactly an open book."

"Which brings us to three. Your commanding officer said you were due for some down time; you've all had a rough couple of days. You especially." Larrin's tone of voice and specific wording ticked Howell off even more.

"I am fine. I do not need coddling. I can handle myself and my problems. They do not concern you." Howell said through gritted teeth. Larrin only smiled, as if amused by his short temper.

"I doubt all of that. But it doesn't matter; your team's already left by now. So let's take a walk and you can fill me in some more."

Larrin walked back down the mountain trail, her tight leather pants and jacket probably making it a very uncomfortable walk. To her credit, she didn't seem to be bothered by the steep and uneven trail.

"Are you coming, or do you need to sit and pout some more?" Larrin called back to him. Howell snapped out of it and walked after her, feeling like a dog responding to a whistle.

\* \* \*

><p>They walked all the way back down to Hangar 7, passing through and around all of the morning traffic. Hangar 7 was a busy place; not only Travelers but other people of the Pegasus galaxy had gathered there to trade, work, and generally live happily without the constant fear of Wraith. With Traveler ships in orbit and an Ancient warship in sight, it was hard not to feel safe from the constant dangers of living in Pegasus.<p>

"So these Wrathgard, what's the story on them?" Larrin asked casually as they walked down a busy street. Children were playing some kind of ball game in the street as people walked milled around in the market place.

"I don't know much more than you do; we were just starting on that section of the 'library' when we had to leave."

"Oh? What happened?"

"Giant bugs tried to eat Major Lorne and Lieutenant Reed. It wasn't a fun day." Howell said dryly. Larrin laughed, and the sound unnerved Howell for some reason.

"Sounds like! Alright, what about this whole time travel thing? Where do you even find a time machine outside of Atlantis?"

"The going theory is a laboratory built by someone named Janus. He was a rogue scientist back in the glory days of Atlantis that ran a lot of unsanctioned experiments. Time travel was one of his favorite pastimes; we've already found two other machines. Well, found one and

heard about another." Howell explained, thinking again about the other Weir they'd found before he arrived on Atlantis.

"So this guy, Janus, just built a hangar full of time machines and left them for whoever stumbled across them?" Larrin asked skeptically.

"He always planned on coming back for them, supposedly. Again, we didn't delve too far into that before the bugs attacked."

"Fair enough. Tell me about your team then; how did you get left behind while the rest of Atlantis sailed off into the sky?"

They'd come to a small restaurant on the edge of Hangar 7; much smaller than the first one and mostly outside. There were a dozen small tables set up in the courtyard-like space on the end of a street. Larrin sat down at one and Howell followed suit.

"We were on a standard reconnaissance mission when we were attacked by the Wraith. We ran back to the gate, but an energy blast from a dart made the wormhole jump from Atlantis to the planet where Captain Labrea picked us up. Apparently Atlantis left sometime during all of this."

Larrin nodded slightly, taking in the strange tale as Howell spoke. As a waiter set a glass of water in front of each of them, Howell had to remind himself he was on an alien planet. Any average Joe from earth would assume the two of them were sitting in Seattle with a good view of the mountains. It was all very serene and normal looking, considering the circumstances.

"Why don't you ask already?" Howell suddenly asked, catching Larrin off guard.

"Pardon?"

"Why don't you ask where Colonel Sheppard is?"

Larrin stiffened up and shrugged her shoulders, seemingly unconcerned. "Why would you think I cared?"

"I read the reports. I know Sheppard. I also noticed that only other captain I've met here is also a gorgeous and flirtatious woman in her thirties. Do you folks have something against men in leadership?" Howell asked boldly, half expecting to be lectured or just shot. Instead, Larrin only smiled and looked down at her hands.

"No, it's just that we pick the best and brightest to fly our ships. Funny how that works outâ€¦ And I'll be sure to mention that to Katana that you think she's 'gorgeous'. She has a thing for you, you know."

"You didn't answer my question." Howell pointed out, ignoring the last sentence.

"No I did not."

They both stared at each other for close to a minute before Larrin broke the silence. "Come on. Your team ought to be back soon; all they were doing was picking up a load of clay. And a few of my



technicians pulled that old junky time machine out of the back of the Jumper; I didn't want it to get in your way." Larrin said in her normal predatory way.

"How nice of you. Don't screw with it, Larrin. It's already caused a lot of damage."

"Excuse me? I think there should be an 'admiral' or maybe a 'ma'am' in there somewhere!" Larrin snapped, suddenly serious. Howell swallowed hard and blinked, worried he'd crossed the line. It was hard not to act familiar with the woman; she'd been trying to play footsy with him the entire time they'd been sitting down.

"I'm kidding. To a point. Let's catch a tram and head for the gate." Larrin's smile returned and she led Howell to a stairway that went almost straight down. The curvy metal staircase reminded Howell of something you'd see in a modern loft back on Earth. This one, however, was sticking straight out of the street.

They both descended the flat metal steps, the sound of their boots echoing around in the chamber below. There was an entire subway system buried just feet below the surface of the city Howell hadn't noticed before. He was mildly annoyed he'd missed it before; the only trams he'd seen led straight to the other valleys.

As the tram pulled up at the 'station', or really just the platform where people and cargo departed, Howell heard Larrin speak again.

"What's the matter?"

"What?" Howell shouted over the squealing of the tram's breaks.

"You're limping and holding your leg." Larrin pointed out. With a start, Howell realized she was right. His right leg felt numb for a moment, but the feeling vanished as soon he looked at the limb.

"Bad memory." Howell said instinctively. He tried to shake the feeling and climbed onto the tram, holding onto one of the metal poles for balance. Larrin stepped into the small car right beside him, and the tram sped off.

"This isn't much faster than walking, but when the streets are this full it's more convenient." Larrin practically shouted, trying to be heard over the roaring wind. The tram itself was black in color, with mismatched metal plates comprising the 'car' area of it. The tracks and engine on the front seemed newer, but the car itself was pretty sorry looking.

When the tram eventually came to a stop, the two of them climbed out of the otherwise empty car and made their way to an identical staircase that led back up to the paved street above. Howell was glad to be out of the tunnel; he much preferred the open air to the dark, cold interior of the tunnel.

"Perfect timing. Here they are." Larrin noticed, nodding at Major Lorne and his team. The tram station was on the same street as the Stargate complex, and Lorne's team had just walked out the front doors.

Lorne was talking to a Traveler man who looked to be in his mid twenties; they seemed to be engaged in a lively debate about whose weapon was superior. The kid was on the losing end of the argument; Lorne knew his P-90 like the back of his hand.

Reed and Coughlin were in the lead, looking worried. Howell noticed it, and Reed caught his stare. He shook his head ominously and waited until they'd all come to a stop.

"Admiral Larrin." The Traveler man said politely, nodding and standing at attention. Lorne saw Howell standing with her and looked slightly guilty, as if he regretted not taking Howell along.

"We secured Bane's log and are in the process of unloading it now; once we type it up into a computer database, it'll be much easier to read and figure out." Lorne explained.

"Do we get a copy of that?" Larrin asked, though by the tone of her voice Howell knew she wasn't taking 'no' for an answer.

Lorne nodded and smiled slightly, catching on like Howell had. "Yes ma'am. It affects you as much as it does us; you're welcome to it."

As he spoke, Reed ran a hand down the back of his neck and pulled something out of his backpack.

"Captain Howell? There's something you might want to see." Reed held out another clay tablet, but this one looked different than the rest. "We found this sitting on the top of the pile, and it was obvious someone had been there recently. The kiln was still hot when we got there."

Howell took the tablet and read it slowly, his gut sinking as he realized who had written it. Reed looked embarrassed while Coughlin and Lorne studied Howell's reaction.

"I'm afraid we already read it; I figured you'd want the original copy, sir."

"Don't worry about it, Lieutenant. It's nothing serious." Howell said simply. Larrin was trying to read it upside down, and it was obvious they were all curious about it. Howell gave in and read it aloud.

"Get a move on with Larrin, Johnny. Before she turns into another Kimberly."

"Interesting advice. Who's Kimberly?" Larrin raised an eyebrow as she looked at Howell.

Howell studied the tablet itself, ignoring her question and trying to compartmentalize it all. "The tablet isn't standard size; the maker must have been in a hurry. The handwriting isn't the same as Bane's, though I wasn't expecting it to be. His writing tool appears to be blunt; look at the way this 'S' is formedâ€¦" Howell said in a monotone, focusing entirely on the clay in front of him.

"The material is inconsistent; he must have gone through the last of

whatever Bane had been using and been forced to improvise. See, there's actually a rock in this corner. What's most interesting is that the way this is phrased, the implication is that the writer has been watching us in real time. He must have been to Vetarel in the past twenty four hours." Howell deduced, still staring at the tablet. Lorne looked annoyed and interrupted him before could go on.

"Drop the Sherlock Holmes attitude, Captain. What does it mean?"

Howell took a deep breath and bit his lip, trying to decide how to word it.

"Howell, the other Howell, knows our past well. He lived it, after all. 'Get a move on' is obviously supposed to say that I need to develop some kind of relationship with Admiral Larrin here. The fact that Larrin is named specifically disturbs me to no end. 'Johnny' was what my father called me. I always hated the nickname. 'Before she turns' suggests that he will either be observing us directly or extrapolating from what he already knows to predict what happens next. And Kimberly" He stopped again, feeling embarrassed and ashamed at having to tell the next part.

"Kimberly Savanna was a sixteen year old girl. I met her when we were both fifteen and became obsessed with her. We never had any kind of a relationship, but I had always wanted one. On the day of her sixteenth birthday, she was found raped, beaten, and murdered in the desert near my house."

"Everyone, including my parents, assumed I was the one who'd" That I was guilty. There wasn't enough evidence to convict, but there was enough evidence for my father. He beat me until I was unconscious and left me lying in the street. When I woke up, he and my mother were gone. I never saw them again."

"Two years later, my name was finally cleared when my best friend confessed to doing it. He'd known enough about me to know how to pin it on me. He knew no one would believe me, and it was only after some" convincing" that he admitted he'd done it. They found the murder weapon and a video capturing the entire ordeal."

Howell slammed the clay tablet onto the pavement below and ground the largest piece of it into dust with his boot heel. The sudden movement startled them all, but Howell wasn't done. Only when the clay had been reduced to dust and was blowing away in the wind did he stop.

"The other Howell is trying to manipulate me. To expose secrets and lies from my past for some reason. The fact that he still knows the name 'Kimberly' suggests that he wouldn't hurt you, Larrin, but I would sleep with a guard at your door from now on." Howell suggested.

Larrin had been listening in silence the entire time, but now spoke up.

"If this other you wants me, he can come and get me. I'll be waiting." She whipped out her gun and twirled it around her finger before tucking it back into her holster.

"This man is dangerous. Do not underestimate him." Howell warned severely. They all seemed to get this, finally, and Howell walked away. They were all watching him, again, as he went but he didn't care. He needed time to process and he wanted them to be able to speak freely about him.

"We've recovered the tablets and it won't take long to have them read and typed up. We'll know a lot more shortly." Lorne commented as soon as Howell was out of earshot.

"Good. I think it's time to start solving these mysteries. Let me know when it's done." Larrin ordered. She walked after Howell, breaking into a jog to catch up with him.

"Sir, what do you think about all of this?" Reed asked Lorne, his brow furrowed in thought.

"I don't know. But I doubt any of this will just sit quietly. We'll figure it out whether we want to or not." Lorne predicted. "I just hope someone remembers we're still out here soon. I'd rather not spend the rest of my life in Pegasus being hunted by an evil Howell."

28. It's been far too long

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**><p>**Six men stood in a circle around Howell. He had stripped off the vest and sidearm holster; he stood in the bright sunlight with only a tee shirt and his camouflage pants. He was holding a long wooden staff in his right hand, balancing it on his shoulders as he watched the men around him.**<p>**

They were all Travelers, former security guards that were being trained to become Stargate Operations Personnel. The name needed work, but Howell was more than willing to help them out withâ€| training.

Two men charged forward, and Howell smiled. They were both holding staves, but neither really knew how to use them.

Howell spun the staff in a circle on his palm, snapping it up at the last second, catching one man in the sternum. He twirled it up and behind him, cracking it down again on the second man's shoulders.

Howell spun on his heel and brought the staff up to catch both men in the chins, smiling at the coincidence of their positions. Both men fell back onto their butts and two more ran in.

These men realized that Howell was no novice and attacked as they ran. Twin staves flew in an arc down on top of him; Howell held his weapon out above him and blocked the blow completely. He then tossed the staff forward, and the idiots instinctively dropped their own weapons to catch it. Howell delivered two lightning fast punches to one man's gut, stepped behind him and flipped him by twisting his arm around. The other lunged at Howell with his new staff, but missed completely. Howell jerked the long pole forward, drove his palm into the man's chin, ran forward and fell onto his back, grabbing the man's head and dragging him down as well.

The Captain leapt up with surprising agility and recovered his weapon. The last two trainees were different; both were women. They approached cautiously, but without hesitation. They were the most advanced of all of their companions.

Their attacks came in unison, lunges and strikes swishing through the air with surprising speed and accuracy. Howell blocked every one of them, nodding respectfully at the women's skill. He then kicked the blonde's knee out from under her, grabbed the brunette's weapon and spun her around, disorienting her completely. He kicked a staff lying on the ground up and into his hand, spinning around to take a slice at both women.

Both dodged the blow, which Howell anticipated. He grabbed the brunette as she lunged forward and forced her to roll completely out of the ring. The blonde he advanced in, twirling the staff in his hands in ever quickening arcs, missing her by only a hair at times.

Finally, with her back to the wooden wall around the ring, Howell smacked her ankle with the weapon and sent her to the ground, bringing the butt of the staff within an inch of her nose.

"Good." Howell said approvingly. He heard a grunt behind him, and thrust the staff in his hand backward, catching the recovered brunette in the forehead. The blow didn't kill or badly hurt her, but it did give her a nice bruise.

"Better. Next time, don't inhale so sharply. I heard you coming a mile away." Howell helped the blonde up and they all left the ring, some limping more than others.

Larrin had been watching them intently, giving out harsh looks to those who'd gone down too easily. Howell noticed her standing there and grabbed his jacket from a post.

"Breaking in the new cadets, I see!" Larrin commented, walking closer to him as she spoke.

"Granted, staff weapons aren't used that much in this galaxy, but the discipline and stamina built from exercises like these don't hurt. You have some talent here, Admiral." Howell said truthfully, remembering to add in the 'admiral'.

"You fight with staves back in your galaxy?" Larrin demanded, picking one of the weapons up gingerly.

"We've had to before. Jaffa are pretty accomplished with their use on the battlefield. I always liked them myself; long sticks or pole

aren't hard to find and make good weapons in a pinch." He set his staff on a rack next to a few others before looking up at her again.

"It occurs to me that I don't have permission to beat up your people; is that why you're here?" Howell asked curiously.

Larrin grinned and shook her head, as if Howell had just made the joke of the year. "No. I wanted to find you and make sure you were alright." Her voice suddenly turned serious as the rest of her people were far enough away.

"That story about Kimberly. It sounded rough."

"My past is what it is. Pity and remorse won't fix it; believe me. I've had plenty of both over the years. I can't forget about it, but I will outlive it. I'm fine." Howell insisted, strapping his vest back on.

"Good. Because I have a job for you and your team. It's been far too long since we've killed any Wraith."

\* \* \*

><p>"The mission is simple; we have knowledge of a Wraith ground facility nearby and we want to check it out." Larrin said, leaning on a table full of diagrams and maps. They were in the command center of the Traveler base, and all of Lorne's team was present.<p>

"There's a gate on the world and a heavy Wraith presence in orbit; the solution is even simpler. You and your team take a squad of my people through the gate and perform a simple recon mission." Larrin looked up at Major Lorne questioningly. Lorne looked over the maps and charts in front of him, nodding slightly.

"Soundsâ€¦ simple. How many Wraith do you estimate on the planet?"

"Only a few hundred. Maybe a queen; maybe not. Nothing too drastic." Larrin said casually. Howell raised an eyebrow and shot Lorne a concerned look. Reed and Coughlin looked utterly disturbed and were shaking their heads 'no'.

"And how many men do you want us to take with us?" Howell asked, wondering if he'd get to see his students in action again.

"Four. There'll be a total of seven of you so as not to draw too much attention." Larrin smiled as they all realized her math was off.

"Excuse me? You seem to have miscounted slightly." Lorne pointed out coldly. Larrin walked around the edge of the table, sliding her fingers on the metal edge as she did.

"No, I want one of you to stay behind. See, my Ancient ship still isn't up to one hundred percent and I need someone with the gene to help me out. I understand you and Captain Howell both have it?"

Howell frowned and looked at Lorne pleadingly. Reed and Coughlin both

stepped back and out of the line of fire, almost disappearing into the shadows of the small room. There was only one light present and it was directly over their table.

"Captain, I'd prefer if you stay behind on this one. I'll take the teams and be back before you know it. I want to oversee this one and you have wanted to familiarize yourself with Ancient technology." Lorne pointed out. Howell kicked himself as he realized Lorne was right. Howell had meant he'd wanted to fly the Jumper next time they went somewhere interesting.

"Yes sir." Captain Howell said stiffly.

"Then you better get going; my team is already waiting at the gate." Larrin suggested. Lorne and the rest of them all filed out of the small, dark room leaving Larrin and Howell behind.

"Don't take it personally; you get to play with a Lantian warship." Larrin teased, elbowing Howell. He glared at her in response.

"Ma'am, with all due respect, shut up."

[[BREAK]]

Despite knowing that he'd have to stay behind, Howell still wanted to see his team off. Larrin, Katana and Howell were all present, as well as a few members of their ruling council. Howell noticed that one of the red-robed women was staring straight at Larrin, who was purposely looking anywhere else.

The gate itself was in a large, steel reinforced room with bunkers and large cannons surrounding it. The cannons were smaller versions of the ones that armed each Traveler vessel, but still larger and more powerful than the small handguns each Traveler carried. The room was maybe twice the size of the gate-room on Atlantis, but it was all on one level and more intelligently designed, in Howell's opinion.

A long trench sunken into the metal floor led to a massive hangar door on one end of the room; its purpose was to give small ships and heavy machinery easy access to the gate itself. The trench wasn't more than a few feet deep, with tapered sides and guard rails here and there. Most of the guns in the facility were aimed at some point along this trench. Anyone who stepped through the gate would have most of the facility looking down on them, and they'd have no place to run.

Several large skylights lit the area, with a large bay door in the ceiling as well. There was an armory in the rear end of the building where the DHD was also housed in its own small bunker.

The Stargate itself was grasped by a giant metal clamp that was sunken a few feet into the ground; if an unexpected wormhole was established, the gate rotated down ninety degrees in ten seconds and any unwelcome guests would be face to face with a metal plate in the trench. Howell admired the resources and work they'd put into the place, but already had ideas for improving it.

"Don't worry. It's a simple recon mission; you won't miss anything exciting." Larrin teased, standing next to him near the edge of the

trench. Howell took a deep breath before answering.

"Why again does your ship need a tune up right now? There's no way you could put it off for say, a few hours?" Howell asked, getting slightly desperate.

Larrin grinned and shook her head. "Nope. You're stuck with me!"

Katana was in the trench with the rest of the team, talking with Lorne quietly as they waited for everyone to assemble. Each man in Lorne's team had been issued a Traveler style handgun in case they ran out of conventional ammo. Larrin had suggested it, which made Howell even more skeptical on how 'quick and easy' the mission would be. They were taking four Travelers along; two men and two women. None were from Howell's earlier exercise; apparently only the best and brightest had been picked to accompany Lorne's team.

"That woman on the council, the one who keeps staring at you; who is she?" Howell finally asked.

Larrin snorted and her mouth twitched; she obviously didn't want to answer and spoke barely above a whisper.

"My mother."

Somehow, Howell had again guessed this. The older woman did resemble Larrin, and his dā@jǎ vu had kicked in again.

"I hope you get along alright. She's coming over." Howell said in the same tone, enjoying the look of distress on Larrin's face.

The woman in red slowly approached; her white hair was tied up in a loose bun and her red council robes were hanging loosely around her like a large blanket. Her eyes seemed far sharper than Howell would have guessed for a woman of her age, and her four counterparts seemed to fear her slightly. None of them had followed her, and all seemed to fear her though there was no obvious difference of rank or seniority.

"Hello, mother." Larrin said painfully. The woman in red ignored her completely and spoke instead to Howell.

"I see your team is preparing to leave. Does it bother you that you will not accompany them?" She asked in a gravelly voice.

"I go where I am needed and do what needs to be done. If I am needed here, I will stay here." Howell answered diplomatically. The woman nodded, as if impressed, and finally looked to Larrin.

"Beatrice, I do hope you treat our guests well. They are a valuable asset I do not wish to see wasted."

"Yes, mother." Larrin ground out. The woman walked back to her group of elders, all of which looked fairly old. The Traveler Council was made up of five representatives; each some of the oldest of the Traveler people. The theory was that if they'd lived this long without being killed by either the Wraith or some other accident, they must know something most people don't. Larrin's mother was obviously the matriarch of the group, and as she gave some signal,



the gate started to dial.

"Beatrice?" Howell asked in a stunned tone.

"Say it again and I'll rip your tongue out." Larrin snapped, grimacing noticeably at the sound of her first name.

"I doubt that. \_Beatrice. \_So Larrin is a last name? I always wondered about that. \_Beatriceâ€|\_" Howell said it slowly and carefully, finding immense amusement at the look on her face.

"Call me that one more timeâ€|" She was cut off by the event horizon forming, and Katana jumped up to join them. She looked a little anxious as the team marched forward, into the blue puddle of the gate.

"Godspeed." Howell whispered as the last man disappeared. The gate's connection was cut off, and Howell turned to Larrin resignedly.

"Shall we get started on your ship, then?"

Larrin still looked like a wet cat as she glared up at him. "Follow me."

The Volura, as Howell learned the ship was called, was a very large ship. At least twice the size of a Traveler vessel, and easily larger than the Daedalus class ships his people had built. Unlike the other Traveler ships, though, there was still an air of neglect inside. Wires and panels were exposed everywhere, tablets and monitors were being welded in, and the lights constantly flickered for some odd reason.

"I can see why you asked for helpâ€|" Howell said critically, dodging two men carrying a crate of spare parts down a corridor. Larrin was in the lead, taking him to some unknown portion of the ship.

"I didn't ask, I ordered you to come along. There's a difference." Larrin snapped. She was still in a bad mood, which was Howell's fault, and seeing her ship so dilapidated wasn't helping.

"Where do you want me to start and what do you want me to do? I'm not a scientist, I just have the gene." Howell reminded her. They rounded a corner and most of the work crews were left behind, though the noise was still loud.

"We have plenty of scientists; it's the gene we need." Larrin still wouldn't look at Howell and was keeping up a good pace as she marched down the corridor.

"When one of our ships comes to find us, we might be able to help with that. All of our ships carry a few doses of the ATA gene now; I'm sure how Sheppard forgot to offer them the last time you worked together."

"We had other things on our mind." Larrin stopped in front of a door and nodded sharply at it.

"See this door? It won't open." Larrin waved her hand in front of the dead console nearby to prove her point. Nothing happened.

"Alright, does it have power running to it?" Howell asked, switching over his train of thought. He went over all of the different possibilities in his head as he studied the door and console in front of him.

"Yes. We triple checked."

"The door console is operational, right?" Howell asked, pulling off the cover for the panel.

Larrin rolled her eyes and nodded patronizingly. "That was the first thing we checked."

"That's oddâ€¦" Howell said quietly. He'd taken the panel's front off and was examining the three crystals in side. They normally glowed blue and hummed slightly; these were completely dead and black.

"You're sure there's power coming into this unit?" Howell asked again, already knowing the answer but wanting to ask nonetheless.

"Positive." Larrin's voice was starting to soften, but still sounded harsh.

"Okay. Well I can't override it without power, and if you're sure there's power running to the console, something else must be preventing it from engaging. Is there a control room nearby we can use?" Howell asked, replacing the front panel.

"The bridge is the closest. Come on."

\* \* \*

><p>The night was black and ominous looking on the Wraith's world; no stars shone overhead and the moon, if that world had one, wasn't bright enough to see. The trees were all dead and bony looking, as if someone had stripped off the bark and leaves perfectly, leaving only the white wood beneath unscathed. An entire forest of these odd trees greeted Lorne and his team as they set foot on the other side of the gate.<p>

"Well, this sure is welcoming." Lorne commented dry. The rest of his men stepped through the gate, and the wormhole died a second later. Without the light of the gate, the woods were almost completely shrouded in darkness. There was one light on the horizon, and Lorne pointed it out as he turned on his P-90's flashlight hesitantly. The light would be visible for miles, but without night vision goggles, he didn't have much choice.

"That must be the Wraith facility." One of the Traveler men said needlessly.

"That's going to be one heck of a walk. It must be miles away!" Reed whined, still staring at the light in the distance.

"We'll head for that ridge for a better view of the place. Our orders are to observe only, so do not engage the Wraith unless absolutely necessary." Lorne warned. The four Travelers all nodded in unison,

none looking to anxious to tackle any of the blood-sucking aliens.

"Alright. Let's headâ€¦" Lorne stopped mid-sentence as a twig snapped off to their right.

"What was that?" Coughlin whirled around and shone his own light into the ivory forest.

His light searched carefully, going over every trunk and branch, passing over a dozen shadows as he searched. No one spoke, or even breathed. Coughlin turned slowly, satisfied that the woods were clear, when they all heard it again. He jerked the light back, and he heard one man scream.

Grinning down at them from a high perch, a Wraith queen in a long, ghostly white gown was waiting. Her teeth flashed in the light, a shot was fired, and Coughlin saw it leapâ€¦

## 29. Call me Volura

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\* \* \*

><p>Howell stood on the bridge of the Volura watching as technicians scrambled around, each on some important task. Larrin was sitting in the command chair, flicking through a mess of screens, displays and other warnings going off all over the ship.<p>

"This makes no senseâ€¦" Larrin muttered, going back over and over again to the mystery door. There was power going to every other system onboard; but that door refused to open.

"May I?" Howell ultimately asked, gesturing at the chair. Larrin gave him a sharp look and readjusted in the chair.

"No, you cannot sit in my lap."

Howell rolled his eyes and sighed, already getting tired of Larrin's flirting. "May I sit in the chair, alone, please?"

Larrin shrugged and stood up, gesturing him to sit down. "Go ahead. But I doubt you'll have much luck; the system is completely scrambled."

"Good. We'll have something in commonâ€¦" Howell half joked. He sat in the metal, somewhat reclined chair and placed his palms on the blue panels, opening his mind to the chair's input.

"Wowâ€¦ This is intense." Howell said in a rare moment of openness. A dozen streams of thought entered his mind, and none of them were his.

Displays were present in front of him, some holographic and others more conventional, but ten times the amount of visual information was being jammed into his head.

"You have the neural interface online? That's been down for a week!" Larrin sounded amazed as she studied the screen in front of her, trying to follow everything he was doing.

"Okay, there is power running to that sectionâ€¦ All quarantine protocols are returning null, I was worried about thatâ€¦ Security seems awfully tight!" Howell remarked, not making much sense to anyone but himself.

"Howell, we don't have any security in that section." Larrin said slowly, as if talking to a child. Howell barely heard her.

"Digital security. Recursive functions, redundant backupsâ€¦ That area is set up to withstand a massive hack. I'm going to need to bypass a lot of codingâ€¦ Hold on!" Howell suddenly went rigid, and his eyes raced back and forth as if he were reading some invisible prompt.

"What is it?" Larrin demanded, standing up and walking back over to him.

"There's something here, watching me, is that you? No, it can't be, it's too fast!" Howell broke out in a cold sweat and gripped the chair arm even tighter.

"Howell, what is it?" Larrin was concerned now, and tried shaking him to bring him out of the near trance.

"It's here, it's rightâ€¦ here!" Howell suddenly leapt up from the chair and a new hologram appeared in front of him. A series of Ancient words flashed onto the blue hologram, but nothing else. Slowly, they reordered themselves, twisting into more familiar shapes.

\_ [Iâ€¦ haveâ€¦ beenâ€¦ waitingâ€¦ forâ€¦ youâ€¦ ] \_

\* \* \*

><p>The firefight started as soon as they saw Wraith. The queen hadn't been alone in her twisted garden; a dozen commander Wraith were waiting in the trees behind Lorne's team.<p>

"Fall back! Find the DHD and dial Vetarel!" Lorne shouted, firing his P-90 as he spoke. A dozen red Traveler bolts shot into the darkness, but no one knew what they were shooting at. Lorne was more than a little concerned about friendly fire; he hadn't seen any Wraith stunner blasts yet.

After what seemed like an eternity but was actually closer to a minute, they all stopped firing. Lorne panted as he searched the trees with a larger flashlight, double checking every nook and cranny a Wraith might be hiding in. He was starting to scan the tree tops when he heard another scream, a woman this time, coming from behind him.

Her yell was muffled by her hand, but even so one of the Traveler men

snapped at her for making the noise. Wraith still might be listening. But Lorne was more focused on what had caused her to scream.

Lying spread eagled on the ground was the still form of Lieutenant Luther Coughlin. Three long slashes in his throat had appeared out of no where, and blood was still oozing out of the wound. His neck had been snapped and was lying at an unnatural angle and his face was still growing white.

But the woman hadn't been upset about that; the second woman to accompany them was also gone. Somehow in the firefight she'd been hit by friendly fire; Traveler fire, no less. A large red welt on her neck confirmed it; she was no longer in the fight either.

"Find the DHD, now. This mission is over." Lorne ordered. He stared for a moment longer at Coughlin's body, in shock over the loss of yet another team mate. He'd also lost Walker and Stevens only a few years ago, and a commanding officer back in Milky Way. He thought he'd be used to it now, but he wasn't.

"But we haven't completed our mission yet!" One the Traveler men argued, his gun still leveled at the tree line.

"Our mission was to assess the Wraith presence here. My assessment is that the Wraith are in fact present. Plus, they know where we are now. We can expect reinforcements on top of us any second. You feel like sticking around to see how many they call?" Lorne demanded, already walking. The DHD had to be close.

"Admiral Larrin ordered us to gather intel on this base!" The man insisted. Lorne stopped short and whirled around to face him.

"What's your name, soldier?"

"Jax Thesher." He answered hesitantly.

"Well we just two men back there, Jax, so this mission is over. Find the DHD and start dialing, now!"

\* \* \*

><p>"What is that?" Larrin demanded, standing beside Howell as they read the words again.<p>

"There's another program in your ship's computer. It was following my every move and locking down systems I tried to access." Howell explained under his breath. He very cautiously sat back down in the chair, not anxious to go another round withâ€| whatever it wasâ€|

"Who are you?" Howell asked out loud. He didn't know if the thing could even hear him, but he wasn't sure what else to do.

\_ [Whoâ€| areâ€| youâ€|?] \_ The writing appeared one word at a time, and seemed shaky. As if the writer was still learning how to type.

"My name is Captain John Howell. Who are you?" Howell asked, more firmly this time. Larrin watched in stark amazement as Howell

actually conversed with her ship.

\_[Volura.]\_ This time the answer came faster and much more solid.

"That's the name of the ship; we found it in the databaseâ€¦" Larrin practically whispered. Howell nodded, trying not to break his concentration. The entity was actively trying to gain control of the ship's systems, and already confused Travelers were starting to complain about the sudden disconnect.

"Volura, what are you?" Howell asked slowly. He already had a very good idea what he was speaking to, but he was curious if Volura knew what it was.

\_[I am a man made cognitive replication program.]\_ The words were more shaky again, as if the program wasn't sure on how to word it.

"A what?" Larrin asked, standing behind the command chair for a better view of the hologram.

"An artificial intelligence." Howell said slowly, the meaning of it finally dawning on him.

\_[Yes.]\_ Volura chimed in.

"What is an artificial intelligence doing on my ship?" Larrin sounded more peeved than surprised; as if she'd discovered a rat and not a near sentient life form.

"I don't know." Howell answered, already racing through a dozen different questions. He settled on one and asked, trying to keep it simple.

"Volura, how are you communicating with us?"

\_[Please be more specific.]\_

"What output source are you using to respond to my input?" Howell asked, thinking back to his programming days. He'd actually been interested in this kind of thing before he'd forced into joining the Air Force.

\_[A visual projection located on the bridge.]\_ Volura seemed to get it this time, and Howell smiled a little at the progress.

"How do understand our language?"

\_[I have been studying the communications of the life forms aboard this vessel since I was activated.]\_

"How long ago were you activated?" Larrin asked suddenly. They both waited for the response for a moment, noticing the other Travelers in the room maneuvering for a better view. She waved a hand to dismiss them, and all six of the technicians filed out of the room. Slowly.

"How long ago were you activated, Volura?" Howell asked, repeating Larrin's question.

\_ [In your units of time measurement: one year, three months, two weeks, four days, seven hours and 6 minutes ago.] \_

"That's about the time our people got this ship operational for the battle over the Replicator world." Howell noted.

"She's precise, at least." Larrin said under her breath.

"'She' is a computer. She better be." Howell answered.

"A computer? Are we sure this isn't some half frozen Lantian in that sealed room?"

"Pretty sure. I'll ask." Howell licked his lips nervously and tried to think how to phrase it.

"Volura, what are you? What are your specifications?"

\_ [I am a quantum computer unit based on the Atlantian Warship Volura. But you may call me Volura.] \_

\* \* \*

><p>They searched for close to half an hour before they realized that the DHD wasn't anywhere near the gate. Lorne then had to make the tough call of leaving the bodies behind; they couldn't afford to take the time to move them.<p>

Coughlin was stripped of his vest and gun, the Traveler woman named Nela Algaran was stripped of her gun and ammo as well. The team, or what was left of it, were forced to venture again into the woods.

Bone white trees and long, sharp shadows seemed to jump out at them at every turn. Gravel crunched under their boots, and the dead air around them magnified every sound they made.

"What was that? Why were they waiting for us?" Reed demanded, white faced and white knuckled.

"The queen was here, out in the open. The other Wraith were high ranking and unarmed; it doesn't make any sense to me either." Lorne admitted. His P-90 was still leveled, and every step he took was measured. They were in a long, canyon like valley with the Wraith facility on one end, and the gate on the other. They were moving into the foothills now, trying to avoid the Wraith altogether. It had worked so far; the strange garden continued on for at least a mile.

"Why would the DHD not be near the gate?" Jax demanded.

"We know darts have built in DHD's; maybe the conventional one on this planet was destroyed. Or buried, or hidden somewhere we can't find it. The Wraith might actually have seen this comingâ€|" Lorne admitted, looking around another white trunk cautiously.

"This is insane! The last time I thought I was going to die was when I came up one short on an armory stock reportâ€|" Verena, the surviving woman fairly whimpered. "What are we going to do?"

"So you're saying we'll have to steal a dart to get home?" Jax said, ignoring her altogether. "Is this how you people normally operate?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, being ambushed on a strange planet by a Wraith queen is pretty normal for us!" Lorne said with a fake smile. "Normally, we send a MALP through first to check out the area around the gate. Your people didn't have any of those, and we assumed that the Wraith wouldn't be expecting us. And as for stealing a dart, I was actually hoping one of your ships could come pick us up."

"Not likely. This planet has three Wraith hives orbiting it at all times. There's no way our fleet could win against those odds." Jax said miserably.

"May I remind you that you have an Ancient warship back on Vetarel?"

"May I remind you that we had to leave one of your men behind to repair it? It's been actingâ€¦ strangeâ€¦ lately." Jax didn't expand on that, and Lorne was too focused on the road ahead of them to press it.

The 'road', or better put, the path between the trees, had ended in a large wall. It was a flesh-bound, dark and creepy looking Wraith style barrier that went on for miles in either direction.

"Well crapâ€¦" The other Traveler man that Lorne didn't know spoke up for the first time.

"Crap indeedâ€¦" Lorne looked up and down the wall, trying to think up some solution. It was at least ten feet tall with no easy handholds or grips in sight.

"We've got C4, but if we set off enough to blow a hole through this, it'll bring every Wraith in a mile down on top of us." Lorne reasoned, squinting through the gloom back towards the gate.

"They must already know we're here. Why haven't they come for us?" Jax asked sincerely.

"They know that the DHD isn't easy to find; if it's here at all. They also know about this wall, since they must have built it. What's the rush? They'll probably hunt us down at their leisure." Reed predicted darkly.

"It's not going to come to that." Lorne assured them. He checked the load on his P-90 and glanced at the Traveler gun in Jax's hand.

"You still have a few rounds in that thing?"

"Over a hundred. Why?" Jax suddenly looked very suspicious as Lorne smiled.

"Because I've got an idea you aren't going to like."



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\* \* \*

><p>"Volura, why are you trying to take control of this ship?" Howell asked patiently, feeling like he'd hit a brick wall. The artificial intelligence was still learning English, though he swore that she was milking it.<p>

\_[Access to ship systems is restricted to members of the crew.]\_

"We \_are\_ members of this crew!" Larrin snapped.

\_[The life forms aboard this vessel are not members of the original crew.]\_ Volura argued. She had no voice; all they were seeing was a screen with writing on it, but still Volura had managed to tick them off.

"Volura, the members of your original crew are dead. Do you understand this?" Howell realized he was taking a chance, but wasn't sure what else to say. He half expected the whole thing to shut down and sparks to fly everywhere, but surprisingly, Volura answered.

\_[Yes.]\_

"Yes. She understands. But no, we still can't access any of the ship's major systems. Great." Larrin threw her hands up and started to pace. Howell set his jaw and thought hard, realizing this wasn't going to be an easy fight.

"What factor or specification is required to be a member of your crew?"

\_[Genetic scans confirm you are not members of this crew.]\_

"Am I?" Howell asked, stumbling onto something. "You said you'd been waiting for me. Am I a member of this crew?"

\_[If you wish to me recognize you as a member of this crew, I shall.]\_

"Yes! I want you to recognize me as crewmember!" Howell shouted, elated at the progress.

\_[Very well. Welcome Captain John Howell.]\_

"Wait, 'Captain'? Does that mean she thinks you'reâ€|?" Larrin's voice suggested that Howell had just made a grave mistake. He caught on to her train of thought and snapped out another question.

"Volura, do you recognize Captain Larrin as a member of this

crew?"

\_"No." \_

"Why not?"

\_[She does not possess the genetic makeup that would qualify her as a member of this crew.]\_

Howell leaned back in the chair and ran his hand over his face. He was still no farther along then when he'd started, and it was starting to get to him.

"Volura I order you to recognize Captain Beatrice Larrin and the other life forms on this ship as your crew. Do you understand me?"

\_[Yes. But I cannot comply.] \_

Larrin fairly growled and whipped out her gun, pointing a finger accusingly at Howell. "Forget it! We're blowing the door open and shutting this thing down \_my way.\_" She got halfway to the door when it suddenly closed in front of her. She spun on her heel, looking incredibly angry.

"Howell get out of the way."

"Larrin, shooting the screen won't help!" He got up from the chair and very gently took the gun out of her hands.

"I'm good with computers and she seems to like me. Give me ten minutes and then you call your people to blow up anything you like."

"I'm calling them now!" Larrin said with a smirk. She whipped out the communicator from her belt and clicked it on.

"Star, this is Larrin. I need a welding team to come to the bridge \_now\_."

There was a disturbing silence, and Larrin tried again.

"Chief Star, I need you to come to the bridge now!"

\_[All communications among the intruders have been blocked.] \_Volura typed smugly.

"That's Chief Engineer Starling? About so tall, blonde hair, kind of cute?" Howell asked, holding out a hand. Larrin raised an eyebrow and shot him a strange look.

"Yeah, how'd you know that?"

"Lucky guess. Volura?" He sat back down in the chair and turned to face the hologram again.

"Who is in command of this ship?"

\_[Captain John Howell.]\_

"Why? Because I have the Ancient gene?"

\_[You possess the genetic marker that informs me of your status. You are a member of this crew.]\_

"Volura, as the captain," Larrin cringed as he spoke, but he kept going anyway. "â€¦ I order you to unlock that door and unblock our communications."

\_[Security measures are required when unidentified life signs are detected. You do not have the authority to override these protocols.]\_

"Well then who does?" Larrin snapped, leaning on Howell's chair again.

\_[I do.]\_

\* \* \*

><p>"You're right! I hate this plan!" Jax yelled over the gunfire. Darts buzzed overhead, Wraith drones were being beamed down, and Major Lorne's team was cornered in a tight grove of trees.<p>

"I didn't realize they'd send everyone! I thought they'd send a few drones to check it out!" Lorne shouted back, firing at another combatant.

"Oh, great plan! Now we've got a hole in a wall we can't get to, and our ambush just backfired on us! Any other great ideas?" Jax demanded, downing another drone as he spoke.

"A few, but you wouldn't like those either!" Lorne said truthfully.

"Well we betterâ€¦" Jax stopped talking as his jaw dropped nearly to the ground. The oncoming Wraith, at least fifty in number, suddenly stopped and started retreating.

"What in the heckâ€¦?" Reed whispered, lowering his own P-90. The other two Travelers stopped firing as well as they all watched the scene unfold.

Dozens of Wraith had been pouring into the bone white woods, now each one was running in the opposite direction. Darts were now beaming troops up instead of down, and a general retreat was being ordered!

"Did we win?" The woman asked slowly, brushing a strand of hair out of her eyes.

"I seriously doubt five humans scared off that many Wraith." Lorne said darkly.

As they watched, one of the darts hovering nearby was blown out of the sky. A bright white bolt had impacted it from above, and shards of metal and flesh went everywhere. The other two darts quickly zoomed away, leaving their troops to die.

But that wasn't nearly as spectacular as what happened next. A bright

white, somewhat familiar light appeared in the woods, and an all too familiar 'zing' reached their ears. Someone had just beamed down to the planet's surface.

It was far enough away that they could barely make out the two creatures that had just arrived. But as the morning sun illuminated the eerie woods, Lorne was able to make a few startling details. The new arrivals were tall, as tall as Wraith commanders. They wore advanced, technological armor that came up to their necks. Their skin was green, not unlike Wraith skin, and long white hair flowed down from oddly large and somewhat bulbous heads. Huge, black and yellow eyes glared out at the Wraith around them.

In a split second, both intruders leapt into action. Large, glowing red sickles shot out of each creature's arm. The men moved in unison, their steps and strokes almost rehearsed. They sliced into each drone like a baker cutting a cake; each slice and cut was measured with precise accuracy.

Red flashed again and again, Wraith screams could be heard, and finally the intruders were down with their grisly work. Twenty Wraith drones were lying dead on the ground, all decapitated or butchered, and the two intruders were unscathed. Their weapons receded into their arms, and in unison, they turned to the group of humans.

"Asgard technology, Wraith physiology" Reed whispered.

"Half Asgard, half Wraith" Lorne went on.

"Wrathgard."

\* \* \*

><p>"Volura, do all Atlantian vessels carry programs like yourself?" Howell asked quickly.<p>

\_[No. I am a prototype model that was not incorporated into any other vessel.]\_

"Gee I wonder why" Larrin said sarcastically. Despite the near dire situation, Howell smiled at the small joke.

"Volura, you are a prototype. You were placed on a ship that was abandoned. Your crew is dead, your mission is over! Your protocols and functions are no longer relevant!" Howell argued sincerely, hoping desperately for some miracle that would allow them to take control.

\_[My protocols and functions were designed to maintain this ship. As long as it exists, I shall always be relevant.]\_

"What are we supposed to do?" Larrin asked quietly, staring at the blue screen in front of them.

"We can't out think a computer. We can't play the waiting game, this thing is ten thousand years old! It's already programmed to do exactly what it's doing!" Larrin shouted.

All of a sudden, a light bulb appeared in Howell's head. He

instinctively grabbed the chair's armrest, and Larrin's hand which was resting there.

"Volura! What emergency protocols do you have regarding the abandoning of this ship?" Howell grinned despite himself, sure he'd found the answer.

"What are you talking about?"

"You said it's already programmed to do this! What if there's a program already in place that can help us out? The Ancients went to all of this trouble to design an AI, don't tell me they didn't think to plan for emergencies, like say, the computer taking over the ship!" Howell explained quickly.

\_[I have several emergency protocols regarding the death, incapacitation, or neutralization of the crew. The one most relevant to your request is the Omega protocol. All control of ship functions would be transferred to the present user in the event of a catastrophic event that neutralized the current crew.]\_

"Yes! Volura, engage the Omega protocol!" Howell unintentionally gripped Larrin's hand tighter in anticipation, and all of a sudden, the door behind them opened.

The consoles and displays all over the bridge came to life, each one behaving normally as if Volura had never seized control.

\_[Welcome Captain John Howell and crew.]\_

"We can change that later, I'm sure." Howell said quickly. Larrin didn't say anything, and Howell realized he was still holding her hand.

"Oh! Sorry, I was justâ€¦!" He stood up and let go of her hand hurriedly, looking embarrassed the whole time.

"Oh it's okay. I didn't mind." Her eyes sparkled in the way that meant she was messing with him, but she didn't say anything else.

"Volura, why didn't you bring this protocol online earlier?" Howell asked, changing the subject.

\_[All emergency protocols must be activated manually.]\_

"And why did you choose today of all days to take control of my ship?" Larrin asked, her voice and expression suddenly much different.

\_[Sufficient power was only recently rerouted back to my central processor.]\_

"Next time I find a locked door, I'm just going to kick it down." Larrin promised darkly.

"Remind me never to invite you to my house."

Before she could respond, Larrin's communicator buzzed to life.

"Admiral Larrin, do you read?"

"Yes, I'm here. What's going on?"

"The recon team missed their scheduled check in. We've been trying to get a hold of you."

"I've been a little preoccupied. I'm on my way now." Larrin angrily shoved the small radio back into her belt and glanced at Howell.

"Looks like you're team is in some trouble. Feel like flying a rescue mission?"

\* \* \*

><p>Slowly, ever so slowly, the two Wrathgard approached. Lorne stepped out of the tight grove of trees they'd been taking shelter in. Reed started to come with him, but Lorne shook his head and made him stay. Jax and the rest of them had their weapons leveled at the incoming aliens, but for the sake of diplomacy, Lorne left his gun at his side.<p>

The aliens finally reached a spot only a few yards away, and one of them spoke.

"We are Wrathgard. You are human. We have no quarrel with you. Yet. Do not trespass on our hunting grounds again."

It's voice was almost hard to listen to. It was low and almost squeaky, like an Asgard, but still harsh and sharp like a Wraith's. Lorne barely understood him.

"Hunting grounds? Your people hunt the Wraith?" Lorne asked carefully, glancing nervously at the spot where the sickles had emerged minutes earlier.

"We are Wrathgard. We hunt the Wraith. Do not trespass on our hunting grounds again."

With that, the two strangers walked back into the woods wordlessly, vanishing into the trees seconds later.

"Thatâ€¦ wasâ€¦ freakyâ€¦" Reed moaned, taking a step outside of their grove.

"If the Wraith are worried about them, they can't be worried about us anymore. Let's get out of here!" Lorne gestured for the Travelers to follow him, and what was left of his recon team broke into a run. With the light of day on their side and the Wraith in full retreat, they now stood a much better chance of finding that DHD.

The bone-like trees seemed less menacing in the day time; like an ancient skeleton that Lorne and his men were forced to run through. It was mostly a downhill run; Lorne hadn't realized the gradual slope on the way up. Within minutes, the tired and frightened team made it to the gate, the sight of the familiar stone ring a welcome sight.

"Alright, spread out and find that DHD! Do not engage any Wraith or Wrathgard; we might have just hit a break!"

Lorne was still speaking when the familiar white light returned, and they all had to turn away to avoid being blinded. When they looked back, Reed moaned and sunk to the ground.

"Oh come on!"

Lorne agreed wholeheartedly. Just as they thought they were in the clear, the Stargate had been beamed right out from under them.

### 31. Bugs On a Windshield

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**><p>**"Before we fly in guns blazing, we might want to dial the gate and make radio contact." Howell suggested mildly as they stood in the command center.**<p>**

"We just tried that. The gate refuses to lock. Larrin was leaning on the table, looking again at a sensor readout she'd received days earlier. One of their spy satellites had gotten them what little information they had before it was destroyed by a patrolling cruiser. Before it was blown to pieces, it sent an image of three hives and two cruisers back to the Traveler world.

"Almost like the gate on the other end was buried. That's not good." Howell said needlessly. His first thought had been to take the Jumper through the gate, abandoning all attempts at stealth. The one Jumper they had access to refused to cloak for reasons unknown, so they'd elected to leave it behind the first time. Now Howell could care less about stealth. His team was in trouble, and Wraith were going to die.

"It looks like our only option is to take our ships in and fight it out." Larrin said sincerely. She shot a worried look up at Howell and bit her lip.

"I'm not sure how well we'll do against a fleet of Wraith hives, Howell."

"We won't have to fight. We'll take the Volura, drop out of hyper-space and jettison the Jumper with just me aboard. The Volura will go back into hyper-space, I'll recover our team, and a few minutes later you'll circle back around and pick us up. The Jumper is small enough to avoid most of the enemy fire and the Volura will only be in range of their guns for a short time."

Larrin listened as he explained his plan and then shook her head

slowly. "So, you can charm an old computer, fly a Jumper through enemy fire, outthink a Wraith blockade \_and\_ fight with a staff. Is there anything you can't do?"

Her tone was sarcastic, but Howell answered as if she were serious. "Ride a bike, cook, swim in deep water, and talk to women."

"You're talking to me right now!" Larrin looked offended and a little confused. Howell only grinned.

"What's your point?"

Howell thought she would be angry and expected her to either swing on him or shoot him. He was pleasantly surprised to see her smile and laugh to herself.

"That's what I like about you Howell. You're fearless. Stupidly fearless, at times, but fearless nonetheless." She turned back to the maps in front of her and went over the plan again mentally.

"How much time will you need to clear the bay once we drop out of hyper-space?"

"I'll have the engines revved and waiting before we hit real space. Give me ten seconds."

Larrin looked up skeptically at him. "Ten seconds? That's all?"

"I don't do things slowly or half way. You'll have hives firing on you and who knows what else. Ten seconds. No more." Howell said firmly.

"Alright then. Let's load up and head out; I don't to leave our people out there any longer than necessary."

\* \* \*

><p>"Howâ€¦ how did they do that?" Jax's friend, Arlo was still staring dumbly at the spot where the gate should have been.<p>

"Asgard possess the technology to dematerialize and rematerialize any object they can lock onto. We're dealing with that technology in the hands of somethingâ€¦ else." Reed summed up, shaking his head in confusion. "But why they would do this, I don't know."

"The Wraith do the same thing, but in a different way. They dial in to prevent escape; the Wrathgard just beam away the gate altogether. Smart for them, bad for us." Lorne finished. He had turned away from the clearing, looking again into the trees beyond.

"It still doesn't make sense; why were those Wraith here in the first place?" Verena asked, kneeling over the bodies of their fallen friends. They'd been arranged in a somewhat dignified position on the side of the clearing.

"We were hereâ€¦ to mateâ€¦"

Every man and woman in the somewhat diminished team whirled around, guns leveled. The voice had come from the trees, and as they watched,



the queen they'd seen earlier slowly emerged.

Lorne's first instinct was to fire, but something stopped him. This Wraith was talking. Most didn't do that.

"You intruded in a sacred ritualâ€¦ you are lucky we allowed you to escapeâ€¦"

The queen was now in plain sight, her withering gaze almost hypnotizing each one of them. No one fired, or even moved. With the queen was the squad of commander Wraith who all stepped out of the trees at once. The humans were completely surrounded, though the Wraith weren't armed. But as Coughlin found out, Wraith didn't need weapons to be deadly.

"What do you want now?" Lorne ground out, not taking his eyes off of the queen. She was tall, taller than Lorne by a few inches. Her hair wasn't the usual white; it was more a light brown. Her skin was a pale green, which was expected, and her teeth were translucent. It was her eyes that drilled into Lorne and his team the most; they seemed to be gripping Lorne with some unseen grip.

"You have brought our enemy hereâ€¦ we should kill you nowâ€¦ but we have a deal to offer you." She stroked her long nails on a nearby tree, as if trying to appear uninterested in the humans.

"A deal? You've got to be kidding me!" Jax gripped his gun tighter and his finger brushed against the trigger.

"Help us escape this worldâ€¦ and we will let you live!" The queen's voice took on a new edge. The arrogance was still present, but now, with an air of desperation to it.

"I've got a better idea." Lorne spoke only to let his people know what he was planning; his finger was on the trigger before he finished speaking.

All at once, everyone and everything moved. Lorne squeezed off a shot, but instead of seeing blood splatter, a shadowy figure dissipated where the queen had stood. He stepped back in shock, but the rest of his team was still going.

Jax fired twice, taking one Wraith male in the chest. He went down, sliding to a rest at the Traveler's feet. But as he went down, a dozen drones emerged from the woods behind him.

Reed held down the trigger of his P-90; round after round ripped out of his weapon and hit the oncoming Wraith. One commander went down, then another. Four more drones ran from the woods, armed with stunners and already firing. Reed sank to one knee to improve his aim, picking off another two before his clip clicked on empty.

Verena tossed him her gun, leaping bodily into the fray as she did. One Wraith was knocked back by her elbow to his face; another went down as she lashed out with her leg, tripping him in mid stride. She spun around and disarmed the first, whipping out his gun and firing a flurry of bolts into the incoming horde.

One Wraith went down with a white blast hitting him in the mask;

another was hit in the shoulder, the chest, the neck, the headâ€¦ Ten Wraith hit the gravel before she stopped and turned to face the rest.

Arlo fired three shots before the Wraith commander reached him, but the alien dodged every shot with ease. Arlo spun the weapon around on his finger, gripping it by the barrel with the metal handle in front of him.

The Wraith didn't see Arlo's gun butt until it hit him in the face; knocking him back a step. Arlo kept going and slid on his knees, whipping the gun back around so he could fire it. The next five shots hit their targets, and five more Wraith were down. He leapt up and pressed the barrel to the back of the commander's head; one red light later he joined his men.

Lorne's P-90 ran out of ammo after only a few shots; he immediately grabbed for his sidearm. He fired so quickly that the ten round clip was empty in seconds. His aim was dead on; ten Wraith drones fell to the gravel without a word or sound.

When the dust and gun smoke settled, Lorne and his team were unscathed, but nearly unarmed. Far too much ammo had been expended.

"What do we do now?" Jax asked, looking over the dead Wraith. Lorne swallowed and looked to the horizon, the Wraith ground facility now clearly visible. With a low groan, Lorne also saw a large contingent of Wraith drones and commanders heading straight for them, slowly marching through the ivory forest. Their white hair and glass-like teeth shone in the sun, making them easy to pick out.

"Get their stunners." Lorne ordered, grabbing up the weapons of the fallen Wraith. Some had to be pulled out of the still warm hands of the drones.

"These aren't very lethal." Verena pointed out, holding up a few in her hands. They had maybe ten minutes before that column of Wraith hit them, and the girl had a point.

"Those Wraith are probably coming here expecting to see a gate. They'll be surprised to see us instead." Reed said darkly, handing Verena her gun back. She pressed it back into his hand and told him to keep it with a gentle smile.

"Let's hope those Wrathgard feel like hunting; otherwiseâ€¦" Lorne didn't finish the thought, but he didn't have to. He had three men and one woman under his command; he was starting to have serious doubts if any of them would ever see home again.

\* \* \*

><p>"Howell, you better be ready!" Larrin said again over the radio. Captain Howell rolled his shoulders and flexed his fingers, trying to keep the jumper steady. His ATA gene hadn't taken well, and it took a lot of concentration and a lot of willpower to keep the ship in the air. Thankfully, he had plenty of both.<p>

"I am. What's our ETA?"

"Forty five seconds. And Howell? There's another ship in orbit. I can't make out what kind; it almost looks Wraith, but not quite." Larrin sounded confused, but firm. She may not have known what was waiting for them, but she knew they were still going in.

"Volura, do read me?" Howell tried, wondering if the computerized custodian was listening in.

"Yes." Her simulated voice was new; on the bridge she'd only used text. It sounded like a young woman in her thirties, but with enough arrogance and condescension in her voice to make it unpleasant.

"Have you processed the scans of the alien vessel yet?"

"Yes." Howell waited for a second before realizing that she wasn't going to go on.

"What do you make of it? Do you recognize the design?"

"No. It is of unknown origin."

Howell was beyond confused now, and tried one last approach before he knew he'd have to fly out of the hangar.

"Are there any close matches?"

"Yes. The design is similar to an Asgard vessel, but with subtle Wraith elements as well. This information seems to conflict as the Wraith and the Asgard are not known to associate."

Howell was impressed with Volura's programming; it was almost unbelievable that she wasn't a real person. But as he thought about it, he realized in seconds what that meant. Wrathgard.

"Howell? We're here!"

All at once the Volura dropped out of hyper-space, the open hangar doors had real space outside of them, and Howell gunned the engines. The Volura's main Jumper bay was on the bottom of the vessel; Howell had to dive straight down to get free of the ship before Larrin jumped again.

The inertial dampeners worked well, but Howell's mind still convinced him that he should be queasy after the insane maneuver. He accelerated to several times the speed of sound in seconds, took an almost ninety degree turn, and then became differently oriented than the ship above him because of the planet below. It was now 'forward' versus 'down' and Howell's head spun in the minute it took to reorient himself.

"I'm clear, get out here Larrin!" Howell shouted. His thoughts focused on one goal; going faster. The Jumper's drive pods whined in protest as he gunned the little ship down, into the rapidly approaching atmosphere.

"Wait, the Wraith aren't firing at us!" Larrin's voice sounded shocked, and Howell craned his head to see the fleet on his left.

Sure enough, three hives were sitting in the planet's orbit, but none were firing. Instead, they seemed to be drifting freely. Above them was a ship Howell had never thought he'd see in his life.

It looked like a standard Asgard type mothership, like the one SG-1 had encountered all those years ago. But this one had a Wraith-like outer hull in some parts; it looked like some twisted nightmare version of an Asgard vessel.

"Larrin, I don't know what that is, but I've still got to get our people. Think you can cover me?" Howell asked quietly.

"No problem."

\* \* \*

><p>Larrin was sitting in the Captain's chair, her hands pressed firmly into the blue armrests beside her. She didn't have the gene, but thanks to the interface technology her people had built, and a little help from Altantian technicians, she could still use the chair. She couldn't work the full neural interface that people like Sheppard and Howell used; but it still responded to some commands. With the help of her bridge crew, she could still fly and operate the ship easily.<p>

"Ma'am? What are your orders?" A nervous Travel man asked, looking back from his station. Out the giant front window of the bridge, the alien looking ship seemed to be staring straight at them.

"Try and position us between the planet and Howell's Jumper and reroute as much power as you can to the shields." She ordered firmly. The man gulped and obeyed, bringing their ship dangerously close to the Wrathgard vessel. The three hives now stood between the opposing ships, but they looked almost abandoned. None fired or even moved as the Volura advanced towards them.

"Volura, are you there?" Larrin asked hesitantly. The blue hologram appeared in front of her instantly.

\_[Yes.]\_

"I want you to shut down, or hibernate, or whatever it is you do. I can run my own ship and I don't want to have you screwing anything up in the middle of a fight. Got it?"

\_[My near instant reaction time and superior processing ability make me an excellent resource in any combat situation. Will you reconsider?]

"No. Power yourself down." Larrin insisted, feeling self conscious that she had to argue with her ship in front of her crew. A few crewmembers turned around to see who she was talking to, but none spoke.

"What's the status of that Jumper?" Larrin demanded as they came to a stop again.

"It's inside the atmosphere now and preparing to landâ€¦ it's down. I think he may have crashed!" A woman behind her said, concern evident in her voice.

Larrin reactivated the ship's communication system with a quick command. "Howell, are you alright?"

"Fine, just a few bugs on the windshield. I've got the team now and we're in the air!" Howell's voice sounded a little strained, and she thought she heard Wraith screams on the other end.

"Howell, did you hit a Wraith with your ship?" Larrin asked suspiciously.

"I was out of drones! Just keep the bay doors open, I'll be there in a minute!"

"Admiral? We're receiving a transmission from the... other ship. It's a one way audio transmission." The same woman as before reported.

"Play it." Larrin leaned forward in her chair, focusing intently on the strange sound being played.

"We are the Wrathgard. You have intruded on our hunting grounds. Turn over your vessel immediately and we will spare your lives. Resist, and we will expand our hunt to include you, as well."

The voice was gravelly, sharp, and malicious sounding. Like a Wraith's, but higher pitched and with less interest. Like the creatures onboard the Wrathgard ship barely cared about Larrin's ship at all.

"Transmit this back." Larrin ordered. "This is the Traveler Warship Volura. We are rescuing our people and don't care about your hunting grounds. You want Wraith? Take them. All I want are the humans."

She sat and waited anxiously to see if there was any response. She'd never been one to negotiate with her enemies; usually she just shot them. But they had so many drones in their hold and few other options in a combat situation.

"Ma'am? They're responding, but with a" She stopped suddenly as a strange figure appeared on their bridge. Two security guards whipped out their weapons and stepped forward, ready to fire.

A Wrathgard soldier was standing in front of Larrin, glaring ominously at her.

## 32. Rising Sun

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\* \* \*

><p>The alien figure stood boldly in front of Admiral Larrin, his eyes not focusing on any one person in particular.<p>

"Ma'am?" One of the security guards was only a few feet from the creature, nervously licking his lips and flexing his trigger finger. Larrin shook her head and waved him away, stepping even closer to the intruder.

Before anyone could move or react, Larrin lashed out with her right fist. Her white knuckled hand went straight into the tall figure's face; half of the bridge crew gasped or jumped at the sight. Larrin's fist was now \_inside\_ the Wrathgard's head.

"Relax. It's a hologram." She assured them, returning to her chair. She sat down slowly, eyeing the Wrathgard carefully.

"What do you want?"

The Wrathgard's hologram obviously couldn't see anything on the bridge, but somehow he heard her. He narrowed his blackish-yellow eyes and glared at the Admiral before answering.

"We are the Wrathgard. These are our hunting grounds. You have intruded."

"You mentioned that already. And I already told \_you\_ that I'm here for my people. Once I have them, we'll be gone." Larrin spoke calmly, but on the inside her heart was pounding. Wraith were some of the few things in the galaxy she feared. This thing standing before was so similar it triggered that ancient childhood fear, but was also intelligent enough to frighten the logical adult in her as well. These aliens were just as advanced as the Lantian's who had built her ship!

"Your ship is of a unique design. Few of them remain in the galaxy. Turn it over to us and we will have nothing to quarrel about. We will return you to your habitat through the Stargate." The other captain offered in a bored tone. His white hair was cut short, coming only to his powerful shoulders. He also wore a suit of armor Larrin had never seen before; thick metal plates covered the entire surface of the Wrathgard's body.

Before Larrin could answer, Volura's blue hologram appeared in front of her.

\_[Your crewmate wishes me to inform you that Captain Howell is aboard and on his way to the bridge.] \_

Larrin was half annoyed that Volura was still online and half glad that the computer had been so resourceful. She shot a quick look over at the woman behind her, the one who'd been monitoring Howell's Jumper, and saw the relieved look on her face. The Wrathgard's hologram was unnerving her people, just like it was unnerving her.

"This ship is ours. We aren't handing it over to anyone." Larrin snarled. She inconspicuously typed out a quick message to Volura, who in turn passed it onto Howell two decks below them.

\* \* \*

><p><em>"Captain Howell; Admiral Larrin wishes me to give you a message: get to the chair. I hope these instructions are relevant to you?"<em>

Howell stopped in his tracks to listen to the computer voice before turning to Lorne.

"Go. We'll head for the bridge and see what's going on."

Howell nodded wordlessly and changed direction, sprinting down the hallways to the chair room on the other side of the ship. Major Lorne and his team all quickened their own pace, more anxious than ever to get to the bridge. Howell's rescue couldn't have come at a better time; the Wraith had literally been inches away when the Jumper flew out of no where.

Howell fairly leapt into the drone chair as soon as he reached the room, the blue lights flickered to life and the metal back reclined, sending a wave of thoughts and information into his mind.

"Volura, what's going on? Have the Wrathgard fired on us?"

\_"No. But they have created a hologram on the bridge that is interacting with Admiral Larrin. Her heart and respiratory rate suggest that she is in distress."\_

Howell's own heart started pounding as he thought about the possibilities. If the Wrathgard were that advanced, what chance did they stand against one of their motherships?

\* \* \*

><p>"Admiral Larrin?" Major Lorne burst onto the brightly lit bridge seconds later with the rest of his team hot on his heels.<p>

Larrin was sitting in her chair, looking unnerved but glad to see Travelers beside him.

"Good to see Howell's flying didn't kill you. Unfortunately we've got other problems now." She nodded at the massive bay window on the other end of the bridge. Beyond it, the Wrathgard ship had just raised their shields.

"That doesn't look goodâ€|" Lorne stared in shock at the massive vessel on the other side of the drifting hives. "Howell's in the chair now, but are we really going to fight it out with that thing?"

"Do you really want to lead it back to Vetarel?" Larrin demanded. She shook her head and reactivated the ship's communications.

"Howell, are you there?"

"I'm ready and waiting in the chair. What's the situation?" Howell's voice came over the speakers surprisingly clear; the Volura's com systems were far better than the Travelers'.

"We've got pissed off aliens getting ready to fire on us; are you ready to fire back?"

"Absolutely."

\* \* \*

><p>Back in the chair room, Volura brought up a sensor display of the Wrathgard ship, displaying statistics and preliminary scans as well.<p>

"Volura, how many drones do we have in the hold?" Howell asked, running some odds in his head.

\_"Twelve."\_

"That's it? Do we have any other weapons onboard?"

\_"Two Traveler type cannons have been installed on our port and starboard side. Admiral Larrin's crew were not able to interface them correctly."\_

"Can you link them to this chair?"

\_"Of course." \_Volura almost sounded offended that Howell would question it. He grinned as a plan started to form in his head.

"Larrin, you still there?"

"Where else would I be, Howell?" Her voice had it's usual level in annoyance in it, which Howell counted as a good sign.

"Good, because I've got another plan that's even stupider than the last one." Howell grinned to himself at the memory before addressing Lorne.

"Major? Do you remember that old game the four of us used to play at Reed's place on the weekends?"

"How could I forget? You practically wrote the book on how to win that gameâ€|"

"Remember Date Night?"

Howell could practically hear the gears turning in Lorne's mind over the radio, and a low groan came a second later.

"With real ships, Howell? Is that a good idea?"

As if to answer him, the entire ship shook as a Wrathgard cannon blast hit their shields.

"Do you have a better one?" Howell demanded.

On the bridge, Lorne shook his head and sighed, already dreading the insane maneuvers he'd have to put the ship through. He walked over to Larrin's chair and gave an apologetic look to the confused Admiral.

"Ma'am, may I? There's no easy to explain this but I need that chair!"



Another volley hit their shields, and Larrin didn't hesitate. She jumped out, Lorne jumped in, and the Volura zoomed forward.

"Here's the plan. We'll waltz around, compliment her dress, kiss her goodnight, and throw rocks at her window. Engage operation Date Night." Howell said quickly over the radio. Lorne took a deep breath, and began the waltz.

\* \* \*

><p>Outside the orbit of the planet, the five ships were all stationary. The Wraith vessels were abandoned or disabled; the Wrathgard had already hunted there. Thankfully, their position blocked a few volleys of the powerful plasma beam weapons racing towards the Volura. She'd yet to return fire, but that was about to change.<p>

Without warning, the Volura jumped to hyper space and vanished from sight. The Wrathgard, confused and disoriented, stopped firing and started scanning.

Behind the massive abomination of a ship, a hyper space window opened, and the Volura shot out again. One mighty pulse of her sub light engines propelled her forward, her maneuvering thrusters fired wildly, and then all power onboard the ship vanished. She went completely dark, and her unpredictable trajectory threw off another volley of the Wrathgard's cannons.

As soon as she had a clear shot, two drones shot out and ripped into the enemy hull, and the Wrathgard shields shimmered and faded away. The Volura's engines lit up, she shot forward and up, her maneuvering thrusters firing again, bringing her somewhat small sub light engines within \_yards\_ of the Wrathgard's exposed hull. The engines roared, white flame shot out, and the Wraith-like hull was baked.

Continuing the turn, the Volura now faced the enemy bridge, though she was technically upside down. The two Traveler style cannons came online, firing almost blindly into what scans had shown was the bridge.

It all happened in under a minute, and the Wrathgard had only managed to fire off two shots during the maneuver. Her shields were gone, her hull was sizzling, and her bridge had ceased to exist. The Volura drifted away, mostly unharmed and gloating in her victory.

"Yes! It worked!" Howell yelled, watching the maneuver courtesy of Volura's hologram screen in the chair room.

"Hate to break it to you Howell, but they're firing again!" Larrin's disappointment was contagious; Howell's face fell as he watched another volley come from the Wrathgard's ship straight towards them.

This time, instead of a low shaking, the lights flickered and the artificial gravity hiccupped. Howell was floated upward and then jerked back down as Volura recovered.

"Damage report?"

\_[Shields are at 22 percent of optimal levels. Artificial gravity has been destabilized. Hull breach on deck three; airtight blast doors have been sealed. Power is down in sections 3 through 5.]\_

"Howell, you have any other ideas?" Larrin shouted over the radio, yells and sirens going off on her end. Howell stared unbelieving at the Wrathgard ship on the screen; how were they still firing? He set his jaw and leaned back in the chair again, his mind focusing on one goal.

"Larrin, I'm going to fire every drone we have at that ship. I don't see any other options." Howell said calmly. The drones in the hold far below reacted to his command, and the small bay door opened to allow their exit.

"Wait! There's another ship on sensors!" Lorne interrupted. Howell paused for a split second, opening one eye to glance at Volura's screen. There was another ship approaching; and it looked familiar.

Another hyper space window opened, and a third member joined the party. This one wasn't Traveler. It wasn't Wraith. It wasn't even Wrathgard, or Ancient, or Asgard. This one was much newer, and much more impressive.

The ROCS Sun Tzu appeared in space only a mile away from the other ships, it's shields up and weapons hot. One cannon alone was recessed into an alcove on the top of the ship, near the center of it's large upper deck, and it roared to life with a vengeance.

Round after round was fired into the Wrathgard's hull, each one ripping deep into it's already scorched surface. After only five shots, the Sun Tzu ceased fire, and the Wrathgard ship exploded into a fireball. Superheated atmosphere and red hot bits of shrapnel shot outwards, and the Sun Tzu leapt forward to intercept the wave from hitting Volura.

After it had all faded and the fires had started to die, the Chinese ship hailed the Volura's bridge.

"This is Captain Chao of the ROCS Sun Tzu. We are here to help."

\* \* \*

><p>The Republic of China Ship Sun Tzu escorted the battered and bruises Volura all the back to Vetaral, remaining radio silent the entire time. Lorne and his team had a chance to recover, and Howell was finally able to ask what had happened to Coughlin and the other Traveler girl, Nela.<p>

Howell always hated that kind of news. He'd lost far too many friends already, and every time he lost another it hit him hard. It hadn't sunk in yet for Lorne, while Reed was even more quiet and reclusive than before.

Larrin and Volura were more than capable of flying the ship without the Airmen, which Volura loved to point out, and the ship made it back home without issue. Larrin could tell the men were upset at the loss of their friend, and she wisely gave them space. It had been a tough day with a lot of strange and horrifying news.

When the two ships finally reached Vetarel, the Sun Tzu remained in orbit while the Volura landed for repairs. Captain Chao promised to meet them planet-side as soon as possible, which Howell and Lorne looked forward to. News from home was beyond welcome after the three days they'd spent out of touch with Atlantis.

"Have your people finished typing up those clay tablets? We need information on those Wrathgard ships as soon as possible." Howell asked coldly as he and Larrin walked. Lorne and Reed were getting checked over by a Traveler physician, though both claimed they were fine.

"Obviously. And yes, they should be done by now. We can bring that up at the next council meeting; my mother is demanding a full debriefing of everyone involved." Larrin said darkly. They were walking down several flights of stairs from the Volura's airlock to the command center below the massive ship's landing pad.

"Is that normal?"

"When making contact with a new, hostile enemy force and almost losing a ship?" Larrin asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Fair point. There is no normal." Howell stopped on the winding staircase as he realized Larrin had fallen behind him. He turned to see her staring at him hesitantly, as if she was deciding whether or not to say something.

"There's something else we need to talk about that doesn't need to make it to the council." She said quietly, slowly descending the last three steps to Howell. She crossed her arms and looked down, either nervous or embarrassed by what she had to say.

Howell swallowed hard and felt his heart beat faster, thinking he'd guessed what she was talking about.

"Back on the planet, we lost two people. Your guy, Coughlin, and Nela Algaran. Did the Major tell you about that?"

Howell relaxed noticeably and silently cursed himself for acting so stupidly. Of course she was talking about that. "He did."

"Well, from what Arlo, another one of my men told me, Nela wasn't killed by Wraith." Larrin looked up at him now, her eyes drilling into his. "She was killed by friendly fire. A Traveler gun, to be exact. That doesn't make sense to me."

"In a dark environment, with Wraith surrounding them, I can see a shot going wild." Howell said gently, trying not to anger the woman.

"See that's the thing. The Wraith were surrounding them. Arlo, Jax, Verena, and Major Lorne were all in a circle in front of the gate. Coughlin was on the outer edge, that's how the queen got him. But Nela was the last one through the gate and still inside that circle of guns. If everyone was shooting outward, why would one shot go in and behind anyone shooting?" Larrin asked, her point starting to come across to Howell.

"That would be odd." Howell admitted.

"And from the angle of the wound and the position of the body, Jax swears that shot came from behind the gate. None of our people were behind the gate!"

Howell thought for a moment, trying to clear all of the other events of the past day out of his head and focus just on this one. It wasn't easy.

"Okay, so we know a Traveler gun killed her, right?" Howell asked, leaning against the rail behind him. Larrin nodded quickly.

"And we know that none of the Traveler we guns your team brought fired that shot, right?"

"That's the mystery." Larrin summed up.

"Don't give up so easily. Where else would a Travel style gun have come from? Did you ever trade with anyone besides Ronon Dex?" Howell watched as Larrin went from puzzled to confused, and finally to lost.

"No. And that wasn't exactly a trade; it's a long story. But no one else in this galaxy has any of our weapons. We're careful about that."

"Okay, have any of yours gone missing lately?" Howell asked, starting to lose hope in being able to solve the new mystery.

All of a sudden, Larrin's face lit up and her head snapped up to look at Howell again.

"Yeah, we did lose one! Nela almost got kicked off of the mission because when she was assigned to armory duty, she came up one short on an inventory report! It was a surprise to anyone who knew her because she's so organized and careful. There's no way that weapon got lost, someone must have taken it. I was going to look into that as soon as we got the Volura up and running again!" Larrin gushed, her mind racing at the possibilities. She looked like she was going to start pacing, but on the tight stairwell it wasn't possible.

"I was just thinking that we hadn't heard from my evil twin lately." Howell said, mostly to himself. He ran a hand over his face and sighed as it all clicked into place.

"You're saying you think this other Howell stole one of our guns, tagged along on that mission without us knowing about it, and assassinated a random woman neither you nor he have any connection to?" Larrin sounded doubtful, but it was the only solution they could think of.

"Maybe. He is insane, you know." Howell pointed out.

"Let's keep this under wraps for now. I don't want any crazy conspiracy theories going around until we know more." Larrin said resignedly. Howell could tell she hated the idea of keeping secrets, but the truth may have been worse than any lie they could dream up.

"Agreed. Now, first your mother and the council want to debrief us, and then the Captain of the Sun Tzu wants a word. This ought to be interesting." Howell started walking again, with Larrin beside him.

### 33. The Perfect Plan

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\* \* \*

**><p><strong>AUTHOR'S NOTE:** I realize this will be a somewhat slow chapter, but these kinds of things are necessary to plan the coming action. And no, Teyla and Ronon have not been written out, their story will be just as interesting as Sheppard and McKay's. I hope you all enjoy this.<strong>

\* \* \*

**><p>**The council meeting went far faster than Howell or Lorne expected; the entire ordeal was over with in less than an hour. Councilwoman Larrin was skeptical about the idea of that ancient clay tablets written by a man who another version of Captain Howell had befriended actually existed. When her daughter suggested they were not only real but provided valuable intelligence, they almost her. But as soon as the section on the Wrathgard was read aloud, no doubts remained.<p>

According to Major Bane's log, the Asgard came to the Pegasus galaxy during the war of the Ancient and the Wraith. They assumed that the war would cover any experiments they undertook for the purpose of prolonging their race, but they didn't get that far.

The original story was long, complicated, and fairly irrelevant. The new Wrathgard had a much different story, that all stemmed from Major Bane's actions. His first stop as soon as he realized that he could activate the TimeJumper was to travel to the point where the Asgard first entered Pegasus.

He was able to communicate with the beings, and detailed a plan he must have made up on the spot. It was brilliant, but risky. He suggested that humans weren't the way to go for their genetic experiments. Instead, he proposed that Wraith DNA held the key to their survival. With Asgard help, three Wraith were procured. A queen, a commander, and a drone.

Bane left the Asgard to experiment to their heart's content, while he flew to another part of the galaxy in the Timejumper's wormhole drive, which no one quite understood. From what Howell could tell, it was powered by the same system that Doctor McKay had discovered on an Ancient outpost years prior. He'd been convinced the system could be fixed, and ended up blowing up a planet or two in the attempt.

Janus had fixed, or at least attempted to fix, the underlying problem. He drew power from their reality, just like the machine had, but it in a much different way. He drew power slowly, let it build up in a battery, and only when it had enough power to fuel the wormhole drive was that power released. The machine was taken offline as soon as the jump was made, and no one was blown up.

The obvious problem was, none of the components lasted long. Bane's Timejumper made it only three places before it died. Colonel Howell's must have been a more advanced model; it was still going strong, somehow.

And so, after he'd convinced the Asgard to encode Wraith DNA into their own, he flew to the planet where the Attero device had just been abandoned. Janus couldn't have been gone for more than a few weeks before Bane bombed the entire facility out of existence with the Jumper's drones.

Without the Attero device and with a new direction in genetics, the Asgard couldn't cause all of the problems in Bane's time line. Unfortunately, he'd created a few new ones in their time line.

The Wrathgard were the prodigy of those early experiments. They were half Wraith, half Asgard, and as such were incredibly advanced. The only flaw in Wraith technology was insufficient power generation; the Asgard had power to spare. Their hybrid ships were the most powerful vessels in the galaxy, and it had taken everything the Volura and the Sun Tzu had to destroy one of them. A fleet of Wrathgard ships would have been near impossible to beat.

Whatever weapon the Sun Tzu had used was still a mystery, but Howell's bet was that it involved nuclear warheads. However the weapon worked, it was definitely effective. Without their timely aid, the Volura would have been destroyed, and Larrin's crew with it.

The Stargate had been beamed up to the Wrathgard ship and somehow disabled; now that the ship was gone, the Stargate was too. Unless of course it survived a nuclear explosion and reentry, which Howell assured the Travelers was possible.

The ending conclusion was simple. There would be no four man SG teams that randomly explored the galaxy; instead, there would be planned, orchestrated military assaults involving dozens of men and at least three ships. The Volura, impressive as she was, was obviously not a match for some of their newest enemies.

Howell, Lorne and Reed were present during the meeting, but had little to say. They'd recovered the tablets, but hadn't read any of them yet. Admiral Larrin and her mother were the only real participants in the meeting; they hashed out the plan while everyone else either nodded politely or avoided eye contact. Howell wasn't scared of either Larrin woman, but he also knew not to get in Beatrice's way.

When it was all said and done, Admiral Larrin and Howell's team all met outside the Volura's landing pad. Captain Chao had radioed that he was coming down shortly, with 'guests'.

As soon as the white glare of the Asgard type transporters faded,

Howell was able to recognize the four guests. Standing in front of him was Colonel John Sheppard, as well as Doctor Rodney McKay, Ronon Dex, and Teyla Emmagan.

"Captain Chao, welcome to Vetarel." Major Lorne said politely. Larrin and Sheppard locked eyes, while the other three turned around to take in the view of the surrounding city.

Chao was a somewhat short man, coming up only to Howell's shoulder. He had very short black hair, a clean shaven face, and an unreadable expression. He was in the standard Daedalus class ship's uniform, but with a Chinese patch on his shoulder declaring his nationality.

"Thank you. It is an honor to visit our allies in such a far flung region." Chao spoke with a heavy accent, but was still understandable.

"You didn't mention that you also had Colonel Sheppard's team aboard." Howell finally said, staring at each member of the legendary team in turn.

"Yeah, well, he didn't mention that were in Pegasus until an hour ago. He's like that." McKay said with a snotty look. He quickly looked around at all of the buildings in the area before locking onto a nearby restaurant.

"Oh look, it's aâ€¦" He didn't finish the thought, merely shooting a pleading look Sheppard's way. He was already walking when Sheppard nodded patiently.

"Yes, go. Please. If it'll shut you up, eat the whole building. I don't care!" His smile and tone of voice were normal, but there was a slight twitch in his eye that betrayed how close to the edge he really was. McKay, Ronon and Teyla all headed for the shop, with even Ronon looking eager at the prospect of a meal. Chao smiled ever so slightly.

"They did not agree with my chef's menu choices. They have been quiteâ€¦ picky, I believe the word is." Who he was complaining to wasn't obvious, as Howell was stars-struck and the rest of them would have been sympathetic with Sheppard's team anyway.

"Yeah, well, we might have been more accommodating if we hadn't been prisoners!" Sheppard lost the friendly, normal tone as he shot a look Chao's way.

"I was told to transport you and your team to the Pegasus galaxy. Be grateful I did not merely leave you on the first planet we came across." Chao snapped back. Both men were trying to remain civil, but Howell could tell there was a long and painful story behind the slightly crazed look in Sheppard's eye and the exhausted look in Chao's.

"It's great to see you, Colonel, but why did you bother to come all this way?" Major Lorne asked, trying to change the subject. Larrin remained silent, and for some reason stayed close to Howell.

"Don't get all choked up or anything, Major, it's good to see you too!" Sheppard joked, patting Lorne on the shoulder. Lorne grinned

and apologized.

"It is good to see you, sir."

Sheppard lightened up as well and rubbed his hands together as if plotting something spectacular. "Well, the man has a fair point. We're here to wipe out the Wraith, all in one shot."

[[BREAK]]

Councilwoman Larrin wasn't pleased at the idea of another long or arduous meeting, so the kind and thoughtful Admiral told her not to bother. She and Captain Labrea were the only Travelers at the meeting as Colonel Sheppard outlined his grand plan.

They were sitting in the same restaurant McKay had headed for, and the Canadian scientist was making a pig of himself. Travelers weren't short on food, unlike most people in the galaxy, but McKay was determined to change that.

Plateful after plateful of steaming, assorted delicacies were brought to his table, with Ronon and Teyla foraging for scraps amid the slaughter. It made Howell's stomach turn to watch the man devour anything and everything that wasn't fast enough to escape him.

Sheppard was sitting at the end of a row of tables, addressing Lorne's team and the two Traveler women as if discussing a play in football game.

"The reason we came here is simple. We have a Wraith prisoner in Atlantis that recently gave us some intel. He's not exactly trustworthy, but I think he's telling the truth this time. And according to Todd, our pet Wraith, there is a planet in this galaxy where every Wraith queen in the galaxy will be together. Some kind of annual meeting to discuss evil deeds and such." Sheppard explained.

"When these queens meet, they will be discussing the extermination of every advanced human civilization in Pegasus. Obviously we don't want this to happen. So, my team will take the battle cruiser Sun Tzu, which I give up trying to pronounceâ€¦" He shook his head after butchering the unfamiliar word. Captain Chao had neglected to attend the meeting for reasons of his own, which was probably a good thing.

"..and we will hit this meeting place with everything we have. According to Todd, there will only be a few ships in orbit to protect against other Wraith who weren't invited to the party. Like Todd. Apparently he was pretty pissy about it and they beefed up security."

"So you plan on buzzing the facility and beaming down a nuke?" Larrin asked, kicking up her boots onto a nearby table.

"Not quite. Wraith ships have been using a jamming code for years that prevents us from beaming nukes onboard. According to Todd, it's standard issue on all ground bases as well."



"So what is this grand plan of yours?" Labrea asked suspiciously. Sheppard unconsciously looked back and forth between the two women as if once again scared of being tied up or beaten.

"We take as many ships as we can and bombard the building from orbit. Theâ€¦" He paused for a minute to think before a proverbial light bulb appeared over his head. "â€¦ Sunny, yeah, we'll go with that; will bombard the surface of the planet with her new and improved rail guns while your ships fly cover. We go in, shoot some Wraith, and get out before reinforcements arrive. Easy as pie." Sheppard said grandly, smiling like a kid in a candy store. Ronon raised his hand comically.

"I like both of those things, for the record."

"Speaking of Chewy and Zena, only McKay and myself will be going on this mission. Teyla has been away from her son for way too long and Ronon is still injured and will \_not\_ be coming." Sheppard had to look Ronon in the eye and say the last part very forcibly to stop him from arguing.

"If you would allow us to use your gate, they'll be on their way. Todd says that the meeting will last for days; we'll have plenty of time."

"You seem to be relying heavily, if not entirely, on information provided by a wraith. Do you really think that's a good idea?" Larrin asked skeptically.

"Todd was left out of the meeting and is feeling peeved. He gave me the information so that I could kill \_his\_ enemies while he sits back and watches. Sort of. He'd have no reason to lie." Sheppard argued.

"There are a few unknowns here. Those usually don't go well when it comes to Wraith." Lorne put in, speaking for the first time. Sheppard nodded held his hands out, acknowledging the point.

"Fair enough, but since when do we have all the details? We have a shot at hitting the Wraith so hard they won't be able to recover! No queens means no more baby Wraith, which means no more troops! We'd have a shot at winning this war!" Sheppard said enthusiastically, trying to appeal to their predatory side.

"I'm in." Reed said coldly. He wasn't eating or drinking, and he hadn't spoken in a while. After Coughlin had died, something seemed to snap in the man that was becoming more and more apparent.

"Before we go running off to wipe out the Wraith, there's something you should know about." Lorne spoke slowly and deliberately, as if hesitant to bring it up at all.

"What is it?"

"Take your pick. We've got time travel, hybrid aliens and a sentient AI controlling the local ancient warship." Howell said boldly. He scooted his chair closer to the table and looked to Lorne for permission.

"Are you serious?" Sheppard asked, glancing at each person in

turn.

"Unfortunately. Howell, go ahead." Lorne shook his head and nodded at the Captain.

\* \* \*

><p>It took over an hour to explain the events of the past few days. Sheppard seemed to have been morbidly expecting some kind of glitch or problem, but even he was shocked at the scope of this latest issue.<p>

McKay looked stunned and then excited as he started theorizing on how the TimeJumpers worked and how much the timeline had been changed. Ronon Teyla were far more concerned about the Wrathgard and how to beat them.

In the end, Sheppard's team asked a lot of good questions no one could answer. The 'why's and 'how's of it all were just too shrouded in mystery to even guess at.

Sheppard kept looking suspiciously at Howell, as if trying to decide if he was telling the truth. But Lorne confirmed it, and even Larrin and Labrea had seen enough to nod in approval.

"Great. That's just great." Sheppard leaned back and ran his hands over his face as he processed it. He reminded Howell of a parent who'd come home from work and seen flames through the windows. Howell kind of felt like that kid who was stuck holding the matches and gasoline, too.

"Fair warning. Last time I came face to face with myself I ended up kicking my own ass."

"Yes sir, I read that report." Howell said too quickly.

Larrin jumped in with a wry smile and that dangerous look in her eye they'd all come to fear.

"Careful Sheppard; you've got a fan."

\* \* \*

><p>Teyla and Ronon were both sent through the gate to New Athos almost immediately after the short meeting. They were told to watch out for Wrathgard, but as Teyla pointed out, chances were slim they'd see any. If this species had remained hidden in their timeline for thousands of years, the likelihood of seeing them twice in one week wasn't good. But McKay was happy to crunch the numbers for them and make everyone uneasy about it anyway.<p>

Sheppard and McKay thought they were going to be stuck on the Sunny for the combat aspect of their mission, but when Larrin offered them seats aboard the Volura, they gladly accepted. Every Traveler on Vetarel hated the Wraith; it wasn't hard to sell the idea of attacking them in full force.

The battle plan was worked out easily enough. The Sun Tzu would fly in and target the Wraith on the ground while the Traveler fleet, Volura included, would keep any Wraith ships busy. It wasn't going to

be an easy fight, but as far as they were concerned, it was the best kind of fight.

Howell, Lorne and Reed would all be on the Volura as well as Sheppard and McKay. Labrea would take her own vessel, as well as two other ships they felt were battle ready. No one wanted to admit it, but there was a chance that something would go terribly wrong. Three conventional ships and the Volura was all the council was willing to risk, even for the chance of killing Wraith.

Preparations were made, and four hyper-space windows opened in orbit of Vetarel. The attack force zoomed off, and all was quiet again.

Even inside the TimeJumper, silence reigned. Colonel Howell smiled to himself as he got the last of his shadow self's train of thought. He was eager; excited for the mission to come. Ready to defeat an old enemy alongside a new friend.

"Oh, how naïve."

#### 34. The Journey Home

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**><p><strong>AUTHOR'S NOTE:** This is a somewhat shorter chapter that focuses more on characters that I have promised, but rarely delivered. Ronon, Teyla, Sora and even Ladon Radim will be the focus of the next few chapters, tying up a few story lines that I feel have been forgotten. I hope you enjoy this.<strong>

\* \* \*

**><p>**Before the Stargate's event horizon had fully faded, Teyla was already glad to be home. Atlantis was a base; a house she had stayed in for so long. But Atlantis was made of metal that glass and flew through the sky at will; New Athos was different. More like the home she remembered.<p>

Brown earth and new foliage sprouted around the gate, while the majestic trees in the distance stood like age old sentries, welcoming the travelers back. Teyla waited for a moment, taking in the scent of the air and the feel of the wind. Atlantian tactical gear had saved her life more than once, but it felt good be back in her traditional leather and linen clothes.

Ronon looked less enthusiastic about being back. He'd spent too many years in cities and towns for his own good; the forest reminded him only of running from the Wraith. She could see it in his eyes, and the way his hand never strayed to far from the holster on his

hip.

"The settlement should be this way." Teyla nodded towards the tree line, and Ronon nodded slowly.

"Looking forward to seeing Torren?" He asked as he walked, eying the trees and skyline. Every tree trunk could have a Wraith behind it; every rock outcropping, blind spot and covered position had to be watched. It wasn't a conscious effort on his part; it was instinct.

"Of course. And Kanaan. I had no idea we were going to be gone for so long; I should have asked Kanaan to stay." Teyla said wistfully, going through the same motions as her friend. She didn't have nearly the same killer instinct that Ronon did, but after so many years of fearing the Wraith, she had her own programmed habits.

"He wanted to visit family and he was going crazy in Atlantis. You couldn't have known what would happen." Ronon said, trying to be reassuring. He wasn't very good at that, but for Teyla, he tried.

"Perhaps. Still, I am sorry I have been gone for so long." Teyla sighed and folded her arms, trying to pick out the familiar markings in the trees and landscape. Her people had always left signs to those who were lost on how to return home. Like breadcrumbs in the woods, sticks would be piled in a certain manner or notches would be cut into branches. It took an expert to see them, but Teyla had created more than a few herself.

It bothered her all the more when she missed where the first one should have been.

"What's wrong?" Ronon asked, sensing her confusion. He instinctively whirled around, scanning a 360 degree arc. Nothing moved for miles around.

"I do not see the markers that lead to the village..."

"You missed them?"

"They are not here." Teyla said firmly, mildly annoyed that he was doubting her. She bent down to get a closer look at an old stump that should have marked with an 'X'. The marking had been burned away, so carefully that it must have been one of her own people.

"What does that mean?" Ronon again looked around, expecting an ambush at every turn.

Teyla slowly rose, thinking hard about the question. Had her people left New Athos and left no trace of the village? If so, why would they have removed the markers? Had they been captured again, wiped out by the Wraith or some disease?

The number of horrifying ends her people had come close to sent a shiver down her spine. The Athosians had lost so much since Atlantis had been re-inhabited; she couldn't bear to think that they had finally met some terrible end while she was gone in another galaxy.

"Teyla? What does that mean?" Ronon asked, more firmly this time. She realized she'd never answered his question and tried to phrase it in a less depressing way.

"The markers that lead to our village have been erased. Purposely erased, no less."

"Hmm. Maybe they moved the village to another site and left new markers."

Ronon's suggestion was so simple and so likely that Teyla almost laughed.

"Of course. Come, let's return to the Stargate; the trail should start there."

She turned around on her heel and took only a single step before something stopped her.

"Teyla?"

Ronon drew his weapon with its signature mechanical whir, while Teyla reached around to force the weapon down. The owner of the voice ducked and shielded something behind him, a look of surprise and shock on his face.

"Kanaan!"

Ronon recognized the face and immediately holstered his weapon, embarrassed at the mistake. Teyla ran forward, right into her husband's arms.

Kanaan had been walking in the woods on the same trail, and had just come around a bend. Torren was right behind him, sitting in a wicker basket strapped to his father's back.

The small family stood close together as Teyla lifted Torren free to hold him in her arms. Kanaan talked and laughed in pure joy, hugging his wife close to him. They spoke in low tones, smiles wide on all three faces.

Ronon watched for a moment before forcing himself to turn away. It was a private moment, and he didn't want to intrude. For only a split second, the image of his wife appeared between the trees. She was smiling at him, just like she had so many times before.

And then she was gone. No matter how many years passed or what changed in his life, Ronon couldn't shake the haunting memory of her. When he dreamed, which wasn't often, he dreamed of her. It took surprisingly little to trigger the feeling, and each time it passed in the blink of an eye. She was gone. He had to remember that.

"Ronon, you were right." Teyla exclaimed, bouncing her son in her arms. "The village was moved after a flood. It is this way; Kanaan was on his way back."

Kanaan nodded respectfully at him, which Ronon returned. The two had never spoken much, if at all. Then again, Ronon wasn't much into speaking, and what was he going to say? Sorry I keep dragging your

wife onto battlefields?

"A flood? Your people don't seem to have much luck with settlements." Ronon observed darkly. He'd meant it as a joke, but Kanaan nodded soberly.

"We do not believe in luck, but no, the ancestors have not made our path easy. But this new site seems to be well located and secure; I'm sure you will like it." He told to both him and Teyla. He slipped the now empty basket off of his shoulders as he walked, sure he wouldn't need it again. Teyla didn't look like she'd ever let the infant go.

"I'm sure." Ronon answered, not sure of what else to say.

They ended up walking on in near silence. Teyla and Kanaan both fussed over Torren, who seemed enthralled by the attention. Ronon watched the trees and almost invisible path that Teyla and her husband were effortlessly following.

He couldn't help but think of the mission going on across the galaxy. Being brought back from the dead wasn't an easy ride, but he'd had worse. Or at least, he thought he had. He felt almost fine now, but Sheppard had been insistent. Besides, as McKay had pointed out, there wouldn't be anything for him to do.

Far, far too much of the war against the Wraith was taking place on ships nowadays. Ronon was on the battlefield less and less, and still he managed to mess up. One lucky shot by a drone, a drone, and he'd been gone.

The idea that a Wraith's curiosity was the only reason he lived didn't sit well with him. It made him want to kill a few dozen more of their kind, but he couldn't even do that. New Athos was no Wraith outpost, and if he did see any Wraith, it meant something had gone terribly wrong.

Before long, the village came into view. Wooden walls made of sharpened stakes woven together greeted them, and a narrow gate led farther into the settlement.

Guards at the entrance, armed with P-90's, welcomed the four of them with smiles and waves.

As soon as the wall was behind them, the rest of the village could be seen sprawled out in a small valley, nested deep under the canopy above. Light spilled through in golden columns here and there, giving the scene an almost enchanted look.

The wooden huts and leather tents that the Athosians used were set up in no particular order or pattern; roads and paths had sprung up between them as the grass was stamped down and the undergrowth died away.

Teyla was a former leader of their people. She had the gift, and she had kept the Athosians safe for over five years, never once giving up on them or leaving them to their fate.

Needless to say, when she and her son walked into the new village, people noticed. She was as close to a celebrity as the Athosians had

ever had. People emerged from tents and ran from every corner of the village to see the legend among them.

Kanaan, the lesser known figure but current leader of the group, hung back with Ronon as they watched.

"So, Ronon. Do you have a family of your own?" He asked. He caught himself at the last second before Ronon answered. "Forgive me, Teyla told me of Sateda. Has there been anyone else?"

Ronon realized he was trying to make small talk with a start. He had nothing in common with the man. And yet, as they both watched Teyla laugh and talk with her people, Ronon realized that wasn't true.

"No. Not really. It's hard finding someone who understands you, you know?" Ronon flinched as the phrase had slipped out. He'd been hanging around the people of earth too long; he was starting to pick up on their habits.

"Never mind, obviously not. You found Teyla." Ronon quickly corrected.

Kanaan snorted and shook his head. "Oh, I know exactly what you mean."

There was a tone of sincerity and remorse that Ronon didn't expect. Kanaan went on.

"Teyla is a warrior, as well as a leader. And yet there are children in this village who can use the weapons your people have given us far better than I ever could. I fear I will never be half the warrior she is."

Ronon shook his head and leaned closer to him, as if to reveal a dark and hidden secret.

"Being a warrior isn't all it's cracked up to be. But that..." He nodded at Teyla and Torren, still in the middle of the rejoicing crowd. "...that, will never get old."

Kanaan looked to Ronon as if surprised at the remark. "Indeed."

For a split second, they both seemed to be on the same page. They watched as Teyla turned around to look back at them, motioning them both to come forward.

Her eyes flicked up and past them before either man could move, and a foul look came over her.

"Guards!"

Both men who had been carefully watching the gate had left their posts when Teyla arrived, and as such, hadn't seen the men and women approaching just behind Kanaan and Ronon.

To their credit, the guards both jerked their weapons to their shoulders and ran forward, right as Ronon turned around and put his gun to a man's chest. The muzzle touched a familiar looking red and gray uniform, and Ronon glared down at the frowning face.

Ladon Radim held out his arms peacefully, feigning confusion at the hostile looks.

"Is this how you great old friends?"

End  
file.